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The Black Motor Car

BY
HARRIS BURLAND



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THE BLACK MOTOR-CAR

CHAPTER I

THE TEMPTRESS

Mrs. de la Mothe sat alone in her pretty drawing-room in Kensington. A single standard lamp with a fluffy pink shade threw a rose-coloured light on her face. A book lay open on her knees, but it was evident that her thoughts were far away from its contents. She was twining her hands together nervously, and the jewelled rings flashed on her thin white fingers. Every now and then she looked at the little ormolu clock on the mantelpiece.

Marie de la Mothe was a beautiful woman; there were those who thought her the most beautiful woman in the whole wide world. She was not yet thirty, and the contour of her head and features had been pronounced by the most eminent sculptor of the day to be perfect. On this particular evening they seemed almost too perfect—too “icily regular, splendidly null.” The face was motionless, save for the large restless eyes, as still as though it had been cut out of a block of marble. She was wont to move through the world with that cold,

white face. Yet more than one man could tell to his cost how it had softened, and how the tender glow of love had crept into the flashing eyes; aye, and could tell, too, how the features had hardened again as he had pleaded in vain and poured out wild words from a broken heart.

And Marie de la Mothe's vocation in life was to play with hearts, and break her toys when they ceased to amuse her or when they ceased to be profitable. She had been a widow for five years.

Some said that Mr. de la Mothe was still alive; others took him on trust; a few were rather doubtful whether he had ever existed at all. But all agreed on one point—that his widow cherished no particular affection for his memory. She knew the world's opinion of her, and smiled on it contemptuously.

In one sense of the word Mrs. de la Mothe was a "good woman." Mrs. Grundy, in whose eyes there is only one kind of virtue, could have inspected her book of life and found therein no blot of any serious consequence. But judged by a higher and less narrow standard of morality this beautiful woman was bad to the very core. She had never erred through love, yet many had erred through love of her. She moved on, calm and scatheless, through a storm of passions and left behind her a broad track of misery and despair, and even death.

There was no sound in the room but the soft spluttering of the fire in the grate and the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. The door opened, and a neat maid-servant brought in tea. Mrs. de la Mothe rose and

went over to the window. The rain pattered against the glass. It was a miserable November afternoon. A dull yellow mist shrouded the square on the other side of the road. A line of iron railings and a few gaunt, leafless trees loomed out in the light of the street-lamps. The pavement glistened, and everything seemed to drip as though it had been bathed in tears.

She turned away from the melancholy spectacle and regarded the tea-table with satisfaction. It was like looking from a vision of death to all that made life worth living.

"Draw the blinds and curtains, Lucy," she said quietly, crossing over to the fireside and settling herself in a low chair.

The maid shut out the last dim light of the miserable autumn day, and, moving to the door, stood there as though expecting some further orders.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. de la Mothe said mechanically. "Tell Mrs. Mixon that tea is ready."

In scarcely more than a minute Mrs. Mixon appeared. She was a lady of about fifty and rustled like a withered leaf. In appearance she was tall, angular, and formidable, the personification of respectability, a chaperon *par excellence*, paid in proportion to her severity.

Yet in reality she was a creature as mild as milk, a household drudge, whose work was less noble than that of the scullery maid; for she had to pretend to be that which she could never be—the stern guardian of Mrs. de la Mothe.

She sat down by the tea-table and discoursed with

feeble persistence. Her employer did not trouble to answer her with more than an interrogative "Yes" or "No," and whenever the conversation grew too brisk she offered her a piece of cake or bread-and-butter. In all cases this proved an effective remedy. Mrs. Mixon ate heartily, and, of course, she could not speak when her mouth was full.

Suddenly there came a violent ring at the bell, and a faint flush came to Mrs. de la Mothe's white cheek. Mrs. Mixon stopped with a piece of cake held close to her mouth, and listened as though she hoped to recognise some voice.

"Whoever can that be, my dear?" she murmured.

The young widow did not reply, but her eyes flashed, and Mrs. Mixon hurriedly thrust the cake into her mouth and took a long gulp of tea.

A few moments passed, and footsteps were heard on the stairs, and the maid ushered a young man into the room. He stood for a moment on the threshold, and frowned slightly as he saw Mrs. Mixon. Then he advanced, smiled, and shook hands with the two ladies.

"You're just in time for some tea, Mr. Porteous," Mrs. de la Mothe said sweetly. "I forget; do you take sugar?"

"No sugar, thanks," the young man replied, seating himself wearily on a straight-backed chair, and laying his hat and gloves on the floor.

"Would you rather have a whisky-and-soda?" she asked. "Yes, I know you would. Just touch the bell."

He laughed, and pressed a small button on the right

of the fireplace. Mrs. Mixon's face was a study in several subdued shades of disapproval. She had her own opinion of young men who drank whisky-and-soda for tea.

When the servant had brought in a tumbler, a siphon of soda, and a small decanter of whisky, John Porteous poured himself out a drink, and gulped down half of it at a single draught. Mrs. Mixon made a mental note that it was a very strong concoction, even for a young man who was, in her opinion, a confirmed drunkard. Mrs. de la Mothe noticed that the hand trembled as he raised the glass to his lips, and a faint smile of satisfaction crossed her face.

Jack Porteous, the manager of the South Kensington branch of Hetherington's bank, was a tall, bearded, broad-shouldered young fellow of thirty-one, who had risen to his present position by sheer hard work and an extraordinary capacity for management and organisation. His face was deeply lined for so young a man, and those who said that he was scarcely old enough to be in his present position were ignorant of the fact that for the last eight years he had compressed work of two years into every twelve months.

The face was a handsome one, but it was not a pleasant face to look upon, even when it had brightened somewhat after the long draught of whisky-and-soda. A close observer would have said it was the face of a man who had sold all happiness for the sake of success. Yet one woman knew that Jack Porteous was willing to barter all success for love, and that the strong principles

which had bound him for a lifetime were threads that she could snap at touch.

The three talked of commonplace subjects, and Mrs. Mixon was by courtesy allowed to monopolise as much of the conversation as she chose. She turned it to theatrical matters.

The other two lit cigarettes, and only occasionally expressed a remark. At last Mrs. Mixon caught her employer's eye, and, rising to her feet, expressed a desire to find something that she was sure would interest Mr. Porteous; some old programmes of Drury Lane in 1852. She laboriously explained that they were at the bottom of a large trunk, but that they were things that every young man should see. She asked to be excused. The others raised no objection, Mr. Porteous suggesting that he would be delighted to see anything Mrs. Mixon might possess relating to the theatre. She left the room, closing the door behind her, and feeling that she was earning every penny of the salary Mrs. de la Mothe paid her.

When she had gone Jack Porteous crossed over to the young widow's side, and, seizing her hands in his, pressed them passionately to his lips.

"Marie," he said hoarsely. She leaned a little forward and looked into his eyes. The cold mask had fallen from her features, and her whole face glowed with a tender light. It was now easy to understand why some men had called her the most beautiful woman in all the world.

"Jack," she whispered in a low voice, "my dear old

Jack," and drawing her hands from his she placed them on his forehead and smoothed back the hair from his brow.

He seized her in his arms and kissed her passionately. Then he suddenly started back as though he had been stung, and buried his face in his hands. The woman leaned back in her chair and frowned.

In fifty previous cases the movement of disgust would have been a source of pleasure to her cruel mind. It denoted the agony of the victim.

But in this particular case Marie de la Mothe had met her match. She had played with love for her own ends, and had conquered. But the battle had been a Pyrrhic victory. She had lost more than she had gained. For the first time in life she was in love, and the knowledge was bitterness to her.

"Well," she said coldly after a pause.

The man lifted his face from his hands. It was haggard and drawn and there were deep lines of pain around the firm mouth. He recovered himself and laughed.

"It's all right," he said in a low voice. "I have them here," and he tapped the breast pocket of his coat.

The woman smiled and held out her hand. He drew out a thick roll of notes and counted them.

"Fifty," he said mechanically, "of a hundred pounds each."

She took them from him and turned them over one by one.

"How long have we got?" she asked abruptly.

"Perhaps a week," he replied. "Perhaps two or three days; perhaps a bare twenty-four hours."

"They must be turned into gold," she said, "or notes of smaller value."

She handed the packet back to him. He replaced them in his pocket, and, lighting another cigarette, looked away from her to the fire.

"How much have you—have you lent me up to now?" she asked.

"Six thousand three hundred and fifty-five pounds," he replied, still watching the glowing coals.

"You are exact," she said sarcastically. "You evidently have the figures at your finger-ends."

"I am likely to remember the figures," he answered; "every penny has to be accounted for in some way or other."

"Have you included the interest?"

"You have paid me the interest up to date," he answered.

She flushed and rose to her feet imperiously.

"Do you think my love is to be bought?" she cried. "I tell you a millionaire has tried to buy it before now, but he has not had enough money to do so. It certainly could not be bought by you, Jack Porteous."

"No, no," he answered hastily, rising and crossing to her side. "I did not mean that, Marie. I know that you love me. I know that, at any rate, or I would not—oh, my God, you do not realise yet what it means."

She laid her hand upon his arm and looked up into his face.

"I realise what it means," she said slowly, "and I am going to repay you. You must leave England the day after to-morrow."

"The day after to-morrow?"

"Yes, you must make some excuse—illness, death in the family, anything; but you must leave the day after to-morrow. I have taken you a berth on the *Oroquoya* for Buenos Ayres. Your name is Mr. Hubert Baring."

"But you?"

"I will follow by the next boat a fortnight later. I will join you at the Hôtel Andalusia in Buenos Ayres. Wait for me there. Give me five hundred pounds. I have a few things to settle up before I leave England. Your ticket has taken all my spare cash."

He counted out the notes and handed them to her.

She came toward him, and, placing her arms around his neck, looked pleadingly into his face. He caught her face between his two strong hands, and gazed earnestly into it as though trying to read the truth from her eyes. Then he kissed her passionately.

"I will come, dearest," he said.

She went over to an escritoire, and, taking out an envelope, handed it to him. It was his ticket to Buenos Ayres. He put it in his pocket.

He was like a child in her hands. His career, his honour, his self-respect, were all at her feet, and she had trampled them in the mud. Yet, while she was in his arms, he thought all the world well lost for love.

"You will go the day after to-morrow?" she whis-

pered. "O heavens, if it should be too late—at any rate. you can conceal yourself till the ship starts. You will, of course, disguise yourself?"

"Yes," he replied, "I shall disguise myself. I shall shave off my beard and moustache."

"And your wife?" she said in a low, hard voice.

He turned away from her and his face whitened.

"My wife?" he repeated slowly, "my wife! Oh, she will be glad." And he laughed. "Her life has been a hell. She has money of her own. She will not starve, but——"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. She knew what was in his mind. A child branded with its father's shame. She did not wish to hear of it. She tried to stifle the words upon his lips. But he loosed himself gently from her clasp and looked hesitatingly at the door.

"He is too young to know," she said. "They will keep it from him. Why do you think of him? Do you think I am giving up nothing? Have you a thought for me? You are selfish, Jack, selfish. It is my position that should trouble you, not——"

"I shall marry you," he said, and a tender glow of love came into his face. "My darling, I am a brute. You are all the world to me. What else matters so long as you are mine?"

And again he kissed her, and yet again.

A footstep and the rustling of silk were heard in the passage outside. They sprang apart and he seized his hat and gloves as the door opened. Mrs. Mixon

entered. She looked at both of them, but could read nothing from their faces. Jack Porteous had apparently risen to say "Good-bye."

She produced half a dozen mouldy playbills. He took them from her with a show of interest, and ran his eye over the names. She insisted on his sitting down, and proceeded to give a graphic account of every performance, describing the actors and actresses with such minuteness of detail that it almost seemed as though they were her dearest friends.

Mrs. de la Mothe yawned and closed her eyes.

At last Jack Porteous took advantage of a break in these reminiscences, and said he feared he would have to go. He rose, and said "Good-bye" to Mrs. Mixon. She still had two whole programmes that required explanation and comment. He agreed to call again at an early date, and still further augment his theatrical knowledge of the early fifties.

Mrs. de la Mothe accompanied him to the hall door. She held out her hand, and he raised it to his lips.

"Good-bye, dearest," he said. "I shall go on board the *Oroquoya* the day after to-morrow. You will find me at the Hôtel Andalusia in Buenos Ayres."

"I will not fail you, Jack," she answered. "Good-bye, darling! Be careful for my sake."

"I will be careful," he said slowly, "for your sake."

Then he looked around the empty hall, and kissed her once on the lips. "Till we meet again," he said, hoarsely—"till we meet again!"

Then he opened the door and passed out into the darkness.

Mrs. de la Mothe watched his tall figure disappear through the curtain of mist and rain. Then she returned to the drawing-room, and there in the firelight she planned out a fairy edifice of future happiness, where all the world would be glad with love. The sordid past had faded from her mind, and, looking forward, she only saw the glorious sunrise of a new life in a new land.

Little did she dream what fate had in store for both of them. She did not remember that the wages of sin is death.

CHAPTER II

THE HAND OF THE DEAD

When Jack Porteous had gone a dozen yards he looked back through the fog and saw a dark figure silhouetted against a patch of lights. Then he heard the hall-door close, and, turning up the collar of his coat, he trudged homeward along the wet pavement.

Every now and then two bright yellow eyes came out of the mist and glared at him, and a husky voice hailed him from the darkness. But he turned a deaf ear to the persuasions of the cabmen, and continued his course on foot. He needed physical exercise. His brain was a whirlpool of tumultuous thoughts, and he did not wish to be alone with them in the quiet of a hansom. He liked to feel the rain against his face and to grope his way through the cold fog unaided. The very physical discomfort was a tonic to his overwrought nerves.

But nothing could subdue the fire that was burning in his brain. The present was a confusion of wild joy and vain regret. The future was uncertain—now bright with hope, now dark with fear. The past alone was definite—a clearly cut record of dishonour and infidelity.

He saw it all before him. The sordid dulness of his home life. The daily quarrels with his wife. The first

meeting with Mrs. de la Mothe. The fascination of the woman. The desire to save her from being turned out penniless into the streets. The first theft. The continual cry for money on some pretext or other. The other thefts, made easy by the responsibility of his position. The gradual passing of friendship into love. The climax—reached on that very night. How clearly he saw it all! How plain was the disgrace of it all; and yet—he felt that he had received more than he had given.

At last he reached his own home. The very exterior, solid, dingy, and respectable, was repulsive to him. In his present mood it seemed to him that he was like a man who, stumbling through the darkness and seeking for light, has suddenly run crash into a blank wall. He paused at the foot of the steps leading up to the pillared portico, and stood irresolute. A light shone in a bedroom window on the second floor. The rest of the house was in darkness. He remembered, with an unreasonable feeling of irritation, that his wife was very economical with the gas. The house seemed even more cheerless than the wet fog outside. The very street-lamp seemed a gay illumination compared to the thin yellow glow from the bedroom window. Even the hall gas had not been lit. The kitchen was in darkness. The cat, mewing pitifully in the area below, seemed to represent the entire life of the household.

He looked once more at the severe frontage of the house. There was the sound of a heavy step in the distance. Probably it was a policeman; no one else would

move so leisurely on such a miserable night. He did not wish to be seen. Hitherto, the policeman had been a friend watching over his interests as a householder. But to-night Porteous looked at him in a new light. The natural enemy of a thief. The symbol of the laws of society which he had outraged.

He turned abruptly on his heel, and walked down the street. Then he hailed a passing hansom and drove to his club. There he had a hot bath, and dressed leisurely for dinner. His present life necessitated his keeping a suit of dress-clothes away from home. When he came down to the smoking-room he ordered a sherry-and-bitters, and lit a cigarette. He nodded to a few acquaintances, and sat down. The flames roared cheerily, and he lay back in the deep, morocco-covered chair with a sigh of relief. The outlook seemed more rosy in the warmth and light. For the last few years this club had represented his home life. Here he had sought rest from the nagging tongue of his wife. Here he had been able to think out his ambitious plans for the future. He smiled grimly as he thought of the splendid castle he had built. It had proved but a house of cards, and a woman's finger had sent it toppling to the ground.

He enjoyed his dinner thoroughly that night. The club was famous for its cooking, and its wines were superb. Afterward a friend came over to his table, and the two men chatted over their coffee and cigars. The friend suggested a music-hall and the bank manager fell in readily with the idea. It was his last evening as Jack Porteous. On the morrow he intended to have his

beard and moustache shaved off. From that hour he would be Mr. Hubert Baring. He had decided to take a room at the Cecil and have everything sent there. A letter to the bank that night would explain his absence. He would enclose the keys of the safe. His assistant would see that everything went smoothly. No suspicion would arise in the minds of any of his subordinates. He was known to be an upright man, and one with whom it was advisable to keep on good terms. The whole of the next day would be spent in completing his purchases and making arrangements for his voyage to South America.

He had resolved to cash two thousand pounds' worth of the notes openly at the Bank of England, and get rid of as many of the others as he could at the various shops.

The whole scheme was simple and apparently safe. It would be hard to trace the man who had cashed the notes, a week after he had sailed. Yes, to-morrow he would be Hubert Baring.

It would be the first day of his new life. But to-night he was Jack Porteous, and he made up his mind to enjoy himself.

The two men decided to go to the Empire, and they passed a very pleasant evening in the lounge. Afterward they drove back to the club and stayed there for over an hour. Then Jack Porteous took a cab home.

The rain had stopped, but the fog had grown more dense, and the drive was long and wearisome.

At last the cabman found the house. Porteous paid him handsomely, and mounted the steps with unsteady feet. He had had a considerable amount to drink that evening.

The house was in absolute darkness. The fog was so dense that he could only just see the nearest street-lamp. It was no more than a dim yellow circle of light. He heard the muffled beat of the horse's hoofs as his cab drove slowly away. He leaned against the pillar, and listened till the sound died away in the distance. Then all was silence.

For quite five minutes he did not move. A sudden and unconquerable fear had seized him. He felt that he dare not enter the house. In his own drunken imagination the dark walls seemed like a tomb. His soul cried out for light. The fog was like a funeral pall. He turned and fixed his eyes on the one yellow glimmer below. It suggested a distant lighthouse—a hope and guide for the storm-tossed mariner. He cowered against the pillar, and clutched the stone with one hand.

Then suddenly from the distance came the sounds of a piano playing "Home, Sweet Home" with infinite variations. The music broke the spell that was upon him. He drew himself upright, and listened. Then he laughed bitterly and looked at the wall of stone that towered above him. Home, sweet home!

He found his latch-key and lit a match, sheltering it with his hand. Something brushed against his feet, and, looking down he saw a blotched mass of fur, and heard the faint mew of a cat. He kicked out with all

his force, and the wretched animal rolled screaming down the steps.

He put the key into the lock and opened the door. But once again the fear of some unknown evil seized him, and he clung to the side of the doorway, his teeth chattering with terror. He cursed himself for a fool, and staggering into the hall, closed the door behind him. A single spot of light glowed above his head. It was the hall lamp turned down to a mere speck of flame. He reached up a trembling hand, fumbled for a few minutes with the tape, and finally succeeded in extinguishing the light.

He reeled back against the wall, and the perspiration streamed from every pore in his body. It seemed to him hours since he had seen the light. He listened attentively and thought he heard something move far up on one of the landings. The clock in the hall ticked loudly, and the beating of his heart seemed to keep time with it. He idly wondered what would happen if the clock suddenly stopped.

He opened his lips to call out. He had often crept quietly upstairs after returning from his club, so that his wife should not wake and upbraid him. He now longed to hear her voice as he stood there in the darkness. He moved forward, and purposely stumbled in the hope of arousing her. The noise echoed through the house, and he waited eagerly for a door to open on the landing above. But nothing stirred.

Then he pulled himself together, and, striking a match, looked carefully around, as though he expected

to see something. At the far end of the hall the movement of a dim figure caught his eye. Then he laughed, for he saw that the figure also held a light, and was merely his own reflection in the looking-glass.

He realised the absurdity of his terror, and, reaching up his hand, turned on the gas and put a match to it.

In a moment the hall was flooded with light, and fear, to a large extent, vanished with the darkness. He lit a candle which stood on the hall table and began to ascend the stairs. Then he suddenly recollected the letter to the bank, and, retracing his steps, crossed the hall, went down a short passage, and opened the door of his study. As he entered, a cold draught of air swept across the room and blew out the candle. He heard a rustling of some papers as they fluttered to the floor, and he started nervously at the sound.

The hall lamp was hidden by the angle of the passage, and only a faint, reflected light stole through the open door.

He could, however, just see the table in the centre of the room, and, moving forward, he placed the candlestick upon it, while he felt in his pocket for another match.

Then he remembered the draught, and making his way back to the door, closed it. The room was now in absolute darkness. Something rustled by the window.

He found his match-box and struck a light. Then he gave a start of surprise. Some one was sitting at his desk by the window. It was a woman, with her head sunk forward in her arms.

He lit the candle and advanced toward the silent figure. It was his wife. She was apparently asleep, for she did not move. She was asleep, but her sleep was the sleep of death.

For a moment he stood in hesitation. He thought of the proverb, "Let sleeping dogs lie." If he roused his wife he knew what he might expect to hear from her lips. Yet he could scarcely with decency leave her there until she awoke of her own accord. He resolved to write and post his letter to the bank. Then he could wake her from her sleep, and go off to bed before she thoroughly realised who had roused her.

He walked up tip-toe to the desk, and took the ink-pot and a pen over to the table. As he did so his hand touched one of the silver candlesticks. It was still hot. The candle had burned down to the socket. He looked round for some writing-paper. There was none to be seen, but he knew that there was plenty in the second drawer from the top on the left hand side of the desk.

He sank quietly on one knee, and opened the drawer. His head was close to his wife's shoulder. He took out a sheet of paper and an envelope. Then for the first time he noticed the complete silence. He held his breath and listened. There was not a single sound but the beating of his own heart. A sudden fear seized him. He tried to see his wife's face. It was buried in her arms. He rose suddenly to his feet, and, taking the candle from the table, thrust it close to her and scrutinised her narrowly. She was absolutely still. There was no movement or sound of breathing.

CHAPTER III

THE BREAKING OF THE CHAIN

No one answered the bell in response to Porteous' summons. It was now 2.30, and the servants were fast asleep at the top of the house. With an effort the man roused himself to action. Staggering to his feet, he left the room, passed out of the hall door, and groped his way through the fog to the nearest doctor.

The two men returned together. The doctor pronounced life to be extinct. He had attended Mrs. Porteous before, and said he knew her heart was weak. Death was due to syncope. Did her husband know of anything that would have been likely to give a great shock to her system?

Porteous replied mechanically that he was not aware of anything of the sort. He said nothing of the life the two had led for the last three years—the endless quarrels, the sullen endurance of each other's society, the mutual neglect, the indifference, growing gradually into positive hatred. All this would have had but little effect on a hard and callous woman, such as he had imagined his wife to be. But in the last hour his eyes had been opened to the terrible truth. She had loved him to the last. She had, perhaps, through all these years, battled in vain with her own unhappy temperament

and lived in the hope of regaining her husband's love. His mind went swiftly over the past and he thought he could now recall certain half-hearted advances on her part, advances made with a genuine hope of reconciliation, but so subdued by the sense of wrongs she had suffered that they were scarcely more than a faint intimation of the spirit that prompted them. Such a life must have been a hell to a woman who loved, and who yet was unable to overcome her sense of resentment. Such a life might well kill a woman with a weak heart. And John Porteous did not look the doctor in the face, when he told him that he knew of nothing that could have caused her death.

The servants were roused, and Mrs. Porteous was carried to her bedroom. The doctor left, and Porteous stayed on alone in the study. He lit a dozen candles and made the room a blaze of light. Then he fetched sticks and paper from the kitchen and re-lit the fire. It blazed up cheerfully with the aid of a little lamp oil, and in less than an hour the room had assumed a more comfortable aspect. But to John Porteous the darkness and cold still lay upon it. The thin veil of fog still hung over everything, and in the chair by the desk still sat the shadow of death.

He crouched close to the fire for warmth. He turned his back upon the window. There was much to be thought of that night, much even to be done. The hand of God had struck, and had struck hard. The blow had fallen in the very centre of his dishonourable plans and scattered them in pieces to the four winds of

Heaven. He had robbed the bank and could not repay the money. His wife was dead, and he could not leave England until she had been buried. Then there was the boy. It would be impossible to desert a motherless and helpless child. Yet his passage was taken on the *Oroquoya* and Marie de la Mothe—he clenched his hands in agony. But out of the chaos of his thoughts came one single idea, clear cut and definite. He could not marry Marie de la Mothe. He owed that at least to the woman who was dead, the woman he had once loved, the woman who had died through his hand.

Yet sentiment would have to be thrust aside if he was to escape the clutches of the law. Sentiment would not weigh with the bank, and the discovery was the matter of a few days, perhaps of a few hours. He could replace nearly £4,500, but the £6,800 had gone as surely as though the money lay at the bottom of the sea. It was the price he had paid for his infidelity, and he had not even yet received that which he had bought. The whole situation was dark and horrible. He could not turn back. It was impossible to go forward. Yet to stand still meant exposure, disgrace, imprisonment—perhaps a long term of penal servitude, for the law does not deal kindly with a man of high position who has abused his trust.

All through the night he sat in his chair, and tried to think of some way out of the difficulties that beset him. But his thoughts were clouded by the dark shadow that had crept into the room, and he found it impossible to reason out any clear plan of action. He

could not forget what he had seen by the desk. Every scheme for the future faded into darkness, where nothing could be distinguished but the silent figure with bowed head and folded arms, and through the silence rang the music of a single refrain:

“ Believe me if all those endearing young charms
That I gaze on so fondly to-day.”

The significance of the words was terrible. Every note of the music was a pang that wrung nerve, and heart, and brain.

Only once did he rise from his chair through all that long and terrible night; then with a sudden impulse he crossed over to the desk, and, unlocking one of the drawers, took out a revolver. For some minutes he stood irresolute. He did not fear death, but he feared the imputation of cowardice which death would bring. A fierce battle raged in his mind. With a set purpose he kept his eyes on the spot where his wife had died. He intensified the horror of his position by every means in his power, by every thought that would bring home to him the necessity of death. Thrice he raised the weapon to his forehead, and thrice his arm sunk slowly back to his side. The photograph of his only son stood on his desk and he could not keep his eyes off it. The baby face laughed at him across the misty flood which swam before his eyes. Yet it was like the face of an accusing angel, and he saw it age with misery and despair, and he heard a voice crying out, “I am the son of a felon and a suicide.” Finally, he thrust the revolver back into the

drawer, and crossing over to the fireplace, flung himself into a chair.

When dawn broke, his eyes were closed in a brief sleep, and his white and haggard face looked horrible in the grey morning light. One of the servants found him there, and the noise of her footsteps roused him from his slumber. Another day had broken, and the light was more terrible than the darkness had been.

He stumbled upstairs, shaved, had a cold bath, and changed his clothes. The ordinary duties of civilised life in some measure restored him to his senses. He ate a poor breakfast, lit a cigar, and drove round to the bank. He reflected in an agony of shame that a real excuse for absence now lay ready to his hand.

From there he drove to the house of Marie de la Mothe. He had only one clear idea for the future in his mind, that he must break all the chains that bound him to this woman. He owed that at least to his dead wife. He was now free to marry whom he chose. The bonds that he had found so irksome had been cut once and for all. Yet the memory of them had become stronger than the reality had ever been. He felt that it was now impossible for him to marry this woman. He had killed his wife by his neglect. This was the least atonement he could make for his crime.

With this idea strong in his mind, he rang the bell of 46, Carey Terrace, and was shown into the drawing-room. The maid lit the fire and went to find her mistress. In a minute or two she brought back word that

Mrs. de la Mothe would see him in about half an hour, if he cared to wait. He nodded assent. He did not care to wait, but it was necessary for him to do so. He required all his strength for the battle that lay before him, a battle not only with the woman who loved him, but with his own passions and desires. Every moment of delay was against him. His purpose was firm and unalterable. But as each minute passed he realised more and more how hard he would have to fight for victory. The very room was antagonistic to his purpose. The little presents he had given this woman were dotted about on tables and shelves. Each one of them recalled some tender memory.

In an hour's time Marie de la Mothe appeared. She looked radiantly beautiful, and had evidently spared no time nor trouble over her toilet. She was, as usual, half an hour late. As a rule he chaffed her about her unpunctuality, but to-day he rose to his feet and took her hand in silence. His face was white and haggard. She glanced at him uneasily. She could see at once that his manner toward her had changed.

"What has happened?" she said abruptly.

"The worst," he replied, not daring to look her straight in the face.

"The bank," she cried, laying hold of his arm. "Impossible! You told me twenty-four hours at least—and why are you here; why are you not——?"

"It is not the bank, Marie," he said in a low voice. She loosed his arm and looked keenly into his face.

"Not the bank!" she exclaimed, "what is it, then?"

Why do you look away from me? What is it? Something you are afraid to tell me?"

"I have come to say good-bye, Marie," he replied, "I may not see you again."

Her face grew pale. Her eyes flashed dangerously and she laughed.

"Good-bye," she repeated. "Yes, yes, of course," she added nervously. "How you frightened me. You go to-morrow, but in a month's time—you silly, old Jack, it is only a month after all," and she clung lovingly to his shoulder.

"It is for longer than that, Marie," he said, slowly. Then he swung around sharply and her hands dropped from his shoulder.

"What has happened?" she cried.

"My wife is dead," he answered in a low voice.

"Your wife? Dead?" she repeated. "You have not——" And she shrank from him with a look of horror.

"I have killed her," he said in a hard voice; "you may well shrink from me. In the eyes of the law I am not a murderer. But I have killed her, as surely as if I had shot or poisoned her."

The woman's face brightened. "I do not understand you, Jack," she said. "How did she die? Why do you say that you have killed her?"

"She died a natural death," he replied. "She died of a broken heart."

A sudden look of fury came into the woman's face, but it passed as quickly as it came. She grew very

white and her lips were pressed closely together. She understood. Both were silent for quite a minute. Then Marie de la Mothe came up to him and laid one hand upon his arm.

"Jack," she whispered, "you are free."

"I am free," he replied mechanically.

"Why do you say the worst has happened?" He was silent. "How can it be the worst when you are free?" she continued. "You did not love your wife, and she—you have often told me of your home life." She looked up into his face pleadingly. But he dared not meet her eyes and he stared fixedly at the window. He had resolved that nothing should turn him from his purpose. Yet he could not bring himself to say that which had to be said.

"Why do you not answer?" she murmured. "Are you not glad that you are free?"

Last night's scene flashed across his brain—the figure in the chair, the awful silence. Glad! Oh, God, the mockery of it all. He clenched his hands and walked away to the window. Then he came back to Marie de la Mothe, who faced him with flashing eyes.

"Marie," he said, "do you not understand that what happened last night has made it impossible for us to marry?"

"I should have thought," she replied quietly, "that it has removed the only barrier to our marriage."

"Do you not understand?" he continued, scarcely heeding her interruption. "Well, I will try and make

it clear to you," and he told her briefly the story of the night before.

She listened almost, as it seemed, impassively, for one whose whole fate was bound up in the narrative. When he had finished, she laughed.

"I understand," she said, "you miserable coward! You do not love me. You have been acting a lie. You have—bah! why should I talk of it? You have made the first excuse that came ready to your hand. It is a poor one, Jack, a very poor one. And I——" She sank into a chair, and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed passionately.

He came to her side and laid his hand upon her shoulder. The struggle within him was terrible. Well he knew that if he lost, his whole life would be too ghastly to endure. He knew that the memory of the night before would hold him to the day of his death.

"Marie," he said tenderly, "I love you still. But—but this has risen between us. I love you, and it is that which will be my punishment. I have much to atone for; and then there is my child."

She did not look up, but her whole body was shaken with sobs.

"My child is motherless," he continued. "I have wronged him enough already. I cannot leave England until my wife is buried. And any moment I may be arrested. He is the son of a thief."

"Why do you not leave to-morrow, and take him with you?" she broke in, raising a tear-stained face from her hands.

"I cannot go until my wife is buried," he said doggedly.

"Why not?"

"I cannot go," he repeated.

"You mean you will not?"

"I cannot go," he said sternly. "I have some decency left in me."

She came close up to him and grasped him by the arm.

"You must go," she said slowly.

"I intend to stay."

He had made up his mind on this point, and nothing could move him now. If by going he could have saved his child from shame he would have, perhaps, yielded. But it was merely a question of his own punishment. Whether he paid the penalty of his crime, or escaped from justice, his child's position would be the same. He would be the son of a common felon. For his own sake it would be best to go. But he thrust all thought of self aside.

"I intend to stay," he repeated. "I have made my plans. The funeral will take place in three days' time. It is possible I shall not be found out for a week. Directly the funeral is over I shall leave England."

"Alone?" the woman said, in a tender voice.

"With my child." His voice trembled and the woman was quick to notice his emotion. Without a word she flung her arms about his neck, and burst into tears.

"Marie, Marie," he whispered, "it is not because I do not love you that I do this. I was ready to give up everything for you, to leave my wife, to sacrifice my

nonour. But what has happened has risen between us like a cloud. It is better for both of us to part. We can never be happy with this shadow upon us. I am a murderer, and I have killed a woman who loved me."

"Not as I love you," she cried, seizing his left hand in hers. "Do you remember when I gave you this ring?" It was a single large opal in a plain gold setting. He wore it on his third finger. He remembered well when she had given it to him. He had sworn never to take it from his hand, and to love her to the day of his death.

"I remember," he said solemnly, "and I will wear it always. But after to-day I will never see you again." She broke away from his clasp and faced him with flushed cheeks and eyes that blazed through their hot tears.

"You can go," she cried. He stood irresolute. "Go, I tell you," she repeated. "You cur," and she pointed to the door. He raised his eyes and read the truth in her face. Her love had turned to the fierce hatred of a woman who had been scorned.

He moved toward the door. When he reached it, he stood for a moment irresolute. The woman held her breath, and stared at him with parted lips. If he would only come back to her, and kiss her, and say good-bye, she might yet move him from his purpose. But Jack Porteous knew how weak he was in this woman's hands.

"Good-bye, Marie," he said in a low voice.

He did not even turn his head. He was afraid, and slunk out of the door like a beaten hound. Marie de la

Mothe moved a step forward and words of entreaty were on her lips. But in a moment she stamped out this last spark of love, and walking over to the fireplace, rang the bell.

A minute later she heard the hall door close. She went to the window and watched the tall figure walk down the street. He did not look back.

Then a sudden burst of fury seized her. She picked up a gold and tortoise-shell paper-knife and, breaking it in half, threw the pieces in the fire. It had been a gift from her lover.

Then she tore the pearl necklace from her throat and stamped it under her foot. Then she moved round the room slowly and deliberately, and, seizing everything he had ever given her, she dashed them one after the other into the fireplace, and beat them into shapeless and broken débris with a poker.

Then she flung herself on the sofa, and lay there with a white face and tearless eyes, staring at the fire until the whole room seemed bathed with blood-red flames. Then suddenly she rose to her feet and laughed. An idea had come to her.

"He shall suffer for this," she cried aloud. "My God! how he shall suffer!"

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE

Fortune favored Jack Porteous during the next two days, and all his arrangements for leaving the country were carried out satisfactorily.

Three hours after he had left Marie de la Mothe he discovered that it was practically certain his defalcations would not be discovered for at least a fortnight, and the terror of immediate detection was removed. He was also lucky in being able to transfer his berth on the *Oroquoya* to a steamer sailing the next week.

But the question of his child presented many difficulties. He had to decide whether to take the boy with him or leave him behind in the care of some relatives. It was a hard struggle for the wretched man. He was devoted to his son, and he realised that if they parted at all the parting would have to be forever. He could not claim the child in after years and brand him with his father's shame.

For a whole night he fought out a silent battle with himself. It was the night before his wife's funeral. Her body lay in the next room. The lid of the coffin had been screwed down and he knew that he could never see her face again. But that face still lived in the features of her child.

All night he lay awake and stared into the darkness. But when the cold grey light of morning came he had made up his mind. His atonement had to be final and complete. His own feelings had to be sacrificed. The child must never see its father again, must never even know its father's name.

The day of the funeral was cold and bleak. A bitter wind blew from the north and drove a few scattered flakes of snow across the churchyard. John Porteous listened to the burial service with a face of stone. Not a muscle moved nor an eyelid quivered. To an ordinary spectator it would have seemed that he was merely a respectful mourner, perhaps some distant relative of the deceased, who had been left some money, and who had attended the funeral as a formal mark of respect.

The little boy stood by his side with a frightened look in his large grey eyes. He barely understood what had happened, but his childish mind was terrified at the solemnity and gloom of the proceedings.

It was only when the coffin had been lowered into the grave, and Porteous had taken a last look at it before the earth had covered it up, that he showed any signs of emotion, and lifting his child up in his arms, he kissed him. No one guessed that he meant that kiss for his dead wife, and that it sealed the resolution of atonement.

The only sister of Mrs. Porteous was present at the funeral. Her husband, who held a small living in Essex, had conducted the burial service. Both were staying the night in London. On the way back from

the cemetery the Rev. George Behag suggested that the widower and his child should return with them to his vicarage and spend a week in the country. The change would do both of them good, and would help in some way to take them out of their grief. Mrs. Behag warmly seconded the proposal. In appearance she was a plain, hard-featured woman, and her general manner was a little forbidding to those who did not know the kindness of heart that lay under the somewhat rough exterior.

She had no children of her own, and this had soured her life. But all her maternal instincts were roused on behalf of the motherless child, who sat beside her in the dark carriage, silent, with wide open eyes, wondering where his mother had gone to, yet not daring to ask his father for a solution of the problem that puzzled his little brain.

John Porteous, in spite of the mist of bitter and vain regret which clouded his thoughts, saw his way clear before him. He replied that business would unfortunately keep him in town, but that he would be very grateful if they would take charge of his child for a few days. As a matter of fact the offer only anticipated his own wishes in the matter. He could secretly leave England while his son was away, and write a short note imploring Mrs. Behag to take the lad under her charge, bring him up as her own son, and never let him know his father's name.

When he went to bed that night he fell on his knees and prayed. It was many years since he had asked

anything of his God, but that night he besought forgiveness for his sins, and prayed that the punishment might not fall on the head of his innocent child.

The next morning the Rev. George Behag and his wife arranged to leave Liverpool Street by the 11:40. John Porteous did not go to the bank that morning. He wanted to have the last few hours with the child, whom, in all probability, he would never see again.

After breakfast he took the little lad into his study. The child was excited at the idea of leaving London, and his father was loth to damp his jubilant spirits. However, Porteous found it impossible to smile in that room. He had purposely chosen it as the place to say good-bye. There, at any rate, his purpose would not be likely to falter. The dark shadow that lay upon his face did not escape the keen observation of the large, childish eyes.

After a while the two talked and played together as if nothing out of the common were about to happen. But by degrees the laughing smile died from the child's face. He threw down his jumping dog, the wonderful black animal that reared impulsively on its hind legs at the mere pressure of the thumb on an India-rubber ball, and came up to his father's side.

"Where's mummy?" he said plaintively.

"She's gone away, Dickie," the wretched man replied.

"When will she come back, papa?"

"She is not coming back, Dickie."

The child clapped his hands. "Mummy's gone to

the country," he cried joyfully. "I will see her to-day?" The man did not answer.

"To-day, perhaps," the child repeated, a little doubtfully.

"Not to-day, Dickie, but some day. Mamma has gone on a long journey. I told you so before, Dickie."

"Yes, yes, papa, but Uncle George lives an awful way off, miles and miles and miles. Perhaps——"

"Not to-day, Dickie. Some day you will see her, if you are good."

"But, papa——"

The man seized the child and kissed him passionately, stifling the question on his lips. Then he took him on his knee and talked to him about the strange and beautiful things he would see in the country—the cows, the horses, the pigs.

"Pigs," the child asked excitedly. "Real pigs?"

"Yes, Dickie, real pigs that grunt, so," and he imitated the animal to the best of his ability.

The child's mind was wholly occupied in listening to the delightful sound. The pig represented to him the highest form of animal existence. But even the pig palled at last.

He called for other animals, and Porteous gave each of them in turn, running through the whole gamut of the farm-yard.

He was imitating the quack of a duck, when there was a knock at the door, and a servant entered.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir."

"I cannot see any one now, Mary," he replied. "Ask them to look in again. Who are they?"

"They gave no name, sir, but they said their business was important."

"Please ask them who they are and what they want. I cannot see any one unless it is on a very urgent matter."

The servant left the room.

Porteous walked over to the window and stared idly into the street. Then he suddenly started, and his face grew very white. Two policemen were standing at the corner half a dozen yards to the right of him. There was nothing unusual in that. But a hundred yards further down the street to the left there was another policeman, and his eyes were fixed on the window. John Porteous moved quickly away and glanced at his child. Then he laughed. "Conscience makes cowards of us all." It was only a mere coincidence. It is not unusual to see policemen in a London street. It is not extraordinary for one of them to be looking at a window.

"Quack, quack," said the child in a piping voice, and waited anxiously for his father to resume the pleasing sound.

The maid re-entered the room.

"The gentlemen say they must see you, sir," she said; "they have come on business from the bank."

"Their names?" he asked.

Before the servant could reply, two men pushed past her into the room. They were both strangers. One of them kept his hands in his pockets.

"We should like a word with you, Mr. Porteous," said one of them, and then looked at the servant.

"You may go, Mary," he replied, "and take Master Dick with you."

"No, no, papa," yelled the child. He was picked up kicking and screaming, and carried forcibly from the room. Porteous went to his desk, and half opened one drawer, as though he intended to look for something. Then he turned round to the two men.

"Well, gentlemen?" he said. One of them stepped forward and produced a paper.

"John Porteous," he said, "I arrest you in the name of the Queen, on a charge of embezzlement and forgery. Do you wish the warrant read to you?"

"You need not trouble," Porteous replied. "I have no doubt that it is in order, and that you have the authority to act on it. Unless, indeed, you are playing a practical joke on me. Doubtless there has been some mistake."

"We have a cab outside the door," the other man said, jingling something in his pocket, "will you come quietly, or must——"

Porteous stealthily moved his hand toward the half-open drawer, but before he could slip his fingers into it he found himself covered by a revolver.

"Close that drawer," the man said sharply, "the game is up. Edwards, put on the handcuffs."

Porteous closed the drawer and buried his face in his hands. Resistance was useless. He knew now why there were three policemen in the street below him.

Edwards advanced toward him, the handcuffs clinking as he walked. Porteous raised his head.

"I will come quietly," he said. "My wife was buried yesterday. My little boy is going away with some relatives to-day. I expect them here every minute. Let there be no scene. See here!" He locked the drawer and threw the key in the fireplace.

"Very well, sir," the man replied. He had a wife and child of his own. He realised the pathos of the scene, the arrest of the man the day after his wife's funeral.

"May I write a line to my brother-in-law?"

"Certainly, but I must read it."

"You can read it."

"Very well, sir, you can write."

John Porteous took a sheet of paper and hurriedly wrote a few lines to the Rev. George Behag.

"DEAR GEORGE:

"I am called away on urgent business. Please take Dickie away with you. Will write later.

"JACK PORTEOUS."

The sergeant read it and smiled. "Urgent business," he repeated. "Ha! ha! very good."

"My child," said Porteous, in a low voice, "may I see him?"

"Certainly. Edwards, ring the bell."

A minute or two later the servant entered. Porteous told her to bring the child down again. When the boy came, his father took him on his knee and kissed him.

The men turned their backs and examined the pictures on the walls.

"Dickie," said the wretched man, "you will have to go in a few minutes. You will be a good boy with your uncle?"

"Yes, papa," the child answered, "and when will you come?"

"Later on, Dickie, later on."

"In a few days?"

"Perhaps, Dickie. Good-bye, my boy."

"Good-bye, papa." Porteous clasped the little child in his arms, kissed him passionately, and set him down on the floor.

"Now, run along, laddie," he said. The boy trotted across the floor, then turned as he reached the door.

"What do the fowls say, papa? I've forgotten."

"Cluck, cluck, cluck, cluck," Porteous replied, "and cock-a-doodle-doo. Good-bye, Dickie."

The boy laughed and clapped his hands. Then he vanished.

"Are you ready, sir?" said Sergeant Scott.

"I am ready."

Three weeks later John Porteous was sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude. The judge found no extenuating circumstances. A man of high position had abused the confidence placed in him. The prisoner could not even plead poverty as an excuse.

The money had not been taken to save a home from ruin, nor to replace losses incurred in a moment of

reckless speculation. It had been taken deliberately, and consistently for some purpose which the prisoner declined to disclose.

The judge had no doubt but that the prisoner had been keeping up a second establishment. He laid particular stress on the fact that the anonymous letter which had put the bank on the scent of the fraud was in a woman's handwriting.

All attempts to discover the writer had failed. This was clearly a case where a man's own sin had found him out, and where the woman, for some unknown motive, had perpetrated a swift and terrible revenge.

Through all the summing up, John Porteous stood white and silent, with his hands on the rail of the dock. He alone knew who had written the letter, which had brought all his plans crashing down about his head.

He did not wish the world to know. From false motives of honour he hugged the secret to his breast. He did not then realise how in the long years to come that secret would eat away the best part of his soul and heart and brain, and leave an empty house for all the devils that come up to earth from hell.

CHAPTER V

HEATHERSTONE HALL

Heatherstone Hall, the seat of the Right Honourable Earl of Heatherstone, G.C.B., G.C.S.I., Privy Councilor and one time Minister at the Court of Rome, is, as most tourists know, one of the show-places of Essex.

It stands on the summit of a small hill, and its great west front, six hundred feet in length, looks over a finely timbered park and across several miles of undulating and wooded country. Behind it the ground slopes gently down to a high stone wall. Beyond that lies the main road running northward into Suffolk, and beyond that a creek, and beyond that again a waste of marsh-land stretching to the sea.

Heatherstone Hall itself was built by the first Lord Heatherstone in 1730, and replaced a smaller but more picturesque building of red brick, which had served as a home for the family since the days of Queen Elizabeth. It was of white stone and shone as a landmark for miles around, and even far out at sea the sailors on the small vessels that passed up and down the coast could see the light of the rising sun on its long line of windows.

Inside, everything was on the grand scale. The first Earl had spent most of his life in a royal palace, where

he had discovered many ways of making money, and his views of a house, suitable for a private gentleman, had been modelled on the ideas of kings. The reception-rooms were enormous, and so numerous that half of them were only used once or twice a year.

The visitor who was allowed to wander through them on payment of one shilling when the family was away, grew heartily sick of looking at pictures and objects of art. It was almost as bad as a day at the Louvre. One room, a huge chamber of gold and marble, was styled "the Throne room." George I. once held a court in this regal apartment.

But the name was a standing jest with the Heatherstones' neighbours, who lost no opportunity of poking fun at the family's pretensions to almost royal state. Everything was in keeping with the splendour of the house. The steward would have made an excellent lord high chamberlain. There was a master of the horse, and a mistress of the robes—a young acting manager, invited to bring his whole company down to the private theatre, had irreverently styled her "the wardrobe mistress."

Such was the home of the Heatherstones. A family of great wealth, but of pride out of all proportion to their greatness. For if the truth be told, the family intellect never again came up to the high standard set by the first Earl.

His successors were men of position and importance. Many of them held high offices of state. There were no fools or spendthrifts in the family. They were all

English gentlemen of culture and sound common-sense, but they never rose to the height of genius.

They were solid and hard-headed, but commonplace. Such men are the ballast of the empire, but it is left to men of a different breed to steer it through the stormy seas of foreign politics.

One glorious summer's day, twenty years after the events narrated in the last chapter, Lord Heatherstone was giving one of his three annual garden-parties.

Lady Heatherstone was a confirmed invalid, and had not left her room for two years, and the duties of hostess devolved on Lady Agnes Cliffe, Lord Heatherstone's only daughter, by a former wife.

The party was, as Lord Harry Quy dryly observed to Miss Cynthia Fox-Stanton, only a semi-state function, and Lord Harry had come in a flannel suit and panama hat.

Yet it was no ordinary entertainment. It was, in fact, semipolitical in character. A bye-election of unusual importance was agitating the whole of the eastern part of the county.

Lord Heatherstone represented Toryism in its most solid and uncompromising aspect. It is true that his great ancestor had been a Whig, but, as he explained to his friends, a Whig in the time of George I. was a power in the land, and the cause was worthy of the attention of a gentleman.

Only two classes of people had been asked to the

party, those whose views were unmistakably of the right sort, and those who had no views at all.

The latter were, of course, open to reasonable argument. Lord Harry Quy, the young man who refused to take the garden-party seriously, had been chosen by Lord Heatherstone to represent the Conservative hopes of the district. He was a younger son of the Marquis of Gorehaven, whose estates joined the north side of the Heatherstone property, and was a general favourite in the county.

A genial, careless young sportsman was Lord Harry Quy, and his chief recommendation to parliamentary honours lay in the fact that he was not likely to do anything startling, and that he was a scratch golfer at St. Andrew's.

His career at Oxford had been a brilliant one. He had been president of the Union and president of the O. U. D. S. He had rowed No. 4 in the eight, and had got his blue at Rugger, as a smart and powerful forward. Incidentally he had taken a fourth in law. It was one of the traditions of his family that they should study the laws of their country.

His father had taken a second, but then Lord Gorehaven had been no athlete, and, apart from the exigencies of the hunting season, he had been able to devote his time to solid reading.

There were over eight hundred people at the garden-party, and before 4:30 it was felt that speeches were in the atmosphere. The tennis and croquet languished.

Groups of budding politicians conversed earnestly in

shady corners. Lord Heatherstone had been seen to glance at some notes in his pocket, and one of his two secretaries was surreptitiously consulting a large book under the shade of a rhododendron.

Lord Harry Quy was nervous and irritable, and looked furtively around as though studying a safe line of retreat. Finally, he retired to the extreme edge of the lawn and pretended to look for lost tennis-balls.

While he was engaged in this engrossing occupation a shadow fell on the flower-bed he had chosen for the scene of his operations, and he turned sharply round on his knees.

"Hallo, Lady Agnes," he cried cheerfully, "have you come to lend a hand?"

Lady Agnes laughed and looked at her frock.

"I am not dressed for gardening," she said, "and why 'Lady Agnes' this afternoon, sir?"

"I am such a stranger," he replied. "I do not think I have seen you more than once since you received me — 'receive' is, I think, the right phrase for a court function, is it not?"

"Don't be idiotic, Harry."

"How many have kissed your hand since then?" he said, rising to his feet and brushing some of the earth from his trousers. "I suppose you kiss the duchesses on the cheek. I believe that is court etiquette?"

"That is so," she replied gaily; "don't you wish you were a duchess?"

Lord Harry's face grew grave, and he turned slightly

away from her. Then he looked her in the face and laughed.

"You are a child, Agnes," he said.

"Thank you, and what are you—an M.P.? Ha! ha! but you won't get in. And what are you, then?"

"A fool, perhaps, Agnes; I know you think me one."

The girl laughed and patted him on the back.

She was only seventeen, and very beautiful. She and Lord Harry Quy had been companions from childhood. She regarded him as one of her best friends.

But on his side the friendship had ripened into love. The girl as yet guessed nothing of the truth, for the young man had carefully concealed it from her.

Her manner toward him was that of an old playmate. As she touched him he imperceptibly shrank from her.

"Poor old Harry," she said mockingly, "don't mind me. Father's going to make a speech about you in a few minutes. You had better come and listen. It will be an antidote to my valuable opinions. You will learn that you are one of the pillars of the empire, the friend and leader of the people, a great legislator—you did get honours in law, didn't you?"

Lord Harry winced. "That's enough, Agnes," he said, with a forced smile. "I daresay I can hold my own, if it comes to a fight," and he unconsciously squared his broad shoulders and tightened the muscles of his hands.

"I am afraid you won't be able to fight the other candidate in the prize-ring," she said, with a provoking smile.

"Stacey Clarke would not be worth fighting anywhere," he replied, "and if it were not for Arthur Holme he would not get a hundred votes. He is a fine fellow, that Holme, a big strong chap, hard as nails, and a good worker. I wish we could have got him to work on our side. Do you know him?"

"No," she said, "and no one seems to know much about him; but all the fisher folk swear by him, and you know they form a large part of your electorate."

"Yes, worse luck! There is no feudal hold on these fisher chaps. They don't care a hang for landowners. In most cases they own their own cottages, and they think more of a mate with a first-class certificate than an earl who does not know a main halliard from a jib sheet."

"Mr. Holme has the pull of you there, Harry. You ought to buy a yacht."

"I hate the sea," he replied. "I should certainly make a fool of myself. This fellow plays the game well. He has bought a fifteen-ton oyster smack and lives in it. No fancy yachts for him with varnished decks and a crew to do the work. He sails the boat himself, with a fisher chap that he treats as a pal. He dodges about these creeks all day long, lives and dresses like a common fisherman. Does his electioneering for Clarke on the water and gets right to the heart of all the men. He is a clever fellow. I daresay it's all humbug, but he makes them think he is a son of the sea, and that he does not care a rap for landlubbers. But

I know something about Stacey Clarke that I intend to let out before the election."

"Not a scandal, I trust," Lady Agnes replied, with a laugh. "Really, you candidates are almost as bad as old women round a tea-table. You revel in raking up your opponent's past, and construct conclusive evidence of a fearful crime out of shreds of gossip."

"No, it is not exactly scandal, but it will knock off about ten per cent. of his votes."

"Tell me, if I ought to listen to it."

"Well, he's got a motor-car."

Lady Agnes burst out laughing.

"What a terrible thing," she said. "I hope you will reveal his secret as soon as possible."

"I can tell you it is a serious matter, Agnes," the young man replied.

"You know the Liberals are dead against motor-cars. They are one of the 'vices of the rich.' This is not a toy thing with bicycle wheels and a rattle that sounds as if it were going to drop to pieces, but a twenty-four horse-power Mercedes, an 'infernal machine'; 'an infringement of the liberty of the subject.' An old rattle-box that crawls along at eight miles an hour and stops at every hill might be tolerated. But this swift, smoothly running monster is an insult to all peace-loving citizens. It is a point in my favour."

"I thought you intended to buy a motor-car for yourself?" queried Lady Agnes.

"I do," he replied, "but not till after the election. I am going to buy a car compared to which Stacey Clarke's

Mercedes will be a mere toy. But at present I mean to let out about the Liberal candidate's motor. He has been trying to keep it rather quiet. It has not been out for weeks. It would not be mean to do this, eh, Agnes?"

"Certainly not," she replied, with a laugh, "but you must remember that sailors are not likely to be troubled much by the motor nuisance."

"Hum! Well, I will see about it. What on earth's that?" A loud burst of cheering suddenly burst upon their ears. A crowd was gathering round Lord Heatherstone. One of his secretaries flew across the lawn to where the two young people were standing.

"We must go, Agnes," Lord Harry said calmly. "Let me see you after all this business is over. I have something rather important to discuss with you."

"More important than politics?"

"Yes," he replied. "In about an hour's time. Your father won't speak for more than that, and I can promise you that five minutes will exhaust all I have to say. I will be down by the old cottage near the East wall. You know it? We used to pretend it was a castle on the border, and that all the land beyond the wall was inhabited by the enemy."

"Of course I know it, Harry," she replied, "but why walk all that way? It is half a mile, and besides, I am the hostess and cannot be rude."

"Oh, most of the people will go before your father's finished. And you can make some excuse to the rest. I want to get away from them all, and talk with you. I haven't had a good chat all day. If we stay here some

idiot is bound to come up and ask for my views on Russia in the Far East."

"Well, I will be there if I can," said the girl, with a laugh. "We must go now. I can see that father has started his speech. Mrs. Maxwell-Frinton is sidling off toward the house under the cover of the audience."

They strolled up to the crowds of people that had gathered round the great Lord Heatherstone, and separated.

CHAPTER VI

MR. ARTHUR HOLME

Shortly after six o'clock most of the guests had departed, and Lady Agnes, released from part of her social duties, cut the rest and slipped away unobserved to the bottom of the garden.

As she reached the gate, which opened out through a thick yew hedge into the park beyond, there was a rustling in the bushes by the edge of the path, and her favourite Irish terrier came sheepishly to her side.

His nose was covered with mould, and there was little doubt he had been engaged in unlawful pursuits.

"O Ginger," she said, in a tone of reproach. The dog looked up at her with pathetic brown eyes and wagged his tail slowly and doubtfully. She stooped down and patted his rough brown coat.

"Come along, you old villain," she said, holding the gate open for him to pass through, and then the two went together down the sloping grasslands of the park, under the great spreading oaks and chestnuts, and through a narrow copse which fringed this side of the Heatherstone estate for two miles.

They emerged into a small open space thickly overgrown with bracken. Beyond it lay the stone wall, which bordered on the road. Everywhere else the

copse touched the wall, and the explanation of this open space was not far to seek.

In the centre of it lay the ruins of a small cottage, a mere heap of grey stones, almost hidden by the ferns which sprung up round it. That which was now a piece of waste land had evidently been once a garden.

Lady Agnes brushed her way through the bracken, and, climbing up to the highest part of the ruins, looked out over the wall.

The view that lay before her eyes presented a strange contrast to the wooded slopes of the park behind her. On the other side of the road flowed a sluggish brown stream several yards in width. The tide was coming in, but on either side of the water there was still a narrow belt of mud, brown on the surface, but black as coal underneath.

Two small boats lay on the mud, and a couple of oyster-smacks were anchored out in midstream. A thin curl of blue smoke rose from the stove pipe of one of them. Deep black holes in the mud showed where the fishermen had walked ashore from their stranded dingheys.

Beyond the creek the flat marshes, seamed with little gullies and dykes, ran for miles, till they reached the sea.

To the south the creek itself narrowed down into a mere ditch. To the north it widened and widened, until it turned around a bend and went eastward, to finally join a broad estuary that swept through square miles of sand and mud into the ocean.

Here and there a small cottage showed up from the waste around it, the home of some lonely fisherman or of one of the watchmen of the oyster-fisheries. These habitations seemed only to accentuate the loneliness of the desolate marshes.

It was a familiar scene to Lady Agnes Cliffe, but it was one that had never lost its fascination for her. To some people the waste places of the earth, the marshes, the deserts, the lonely fields of ice and snow, are only barren and uninteresting.

But the imaginative mind finds more room for its luxuriant fancy in such spots than in the most beautiful landscapes. To Lady Agnes, as she looked out from the border of her father's splendid park, these dreary marshes represented the unknown, the unexplored, the edge of the world.

As children she and Lord Harry had sat secure in their broken stronghold of grey stones and looked out toward the east, watching for the enemy that never came, though they firmly believed that he lay hidden somewhere beyond the muddy creek.

Often of an afternoon they would spy his movements in the white sail of a distant boat, in the stir of some rushes, in the rustling of a bush, in the sudden flight of a heron or some wild duck. But they never saw him, though they knew well where he lived. To the north-east, and distant some eight miles as the crow flew, a small stony hillock rose up against the sky. On the side of it stood a large red brick house.

It was almost invisible from their fortress, but both

of them had explored the long road which ran to it between two creeks. The house had always, as far as they could remember, been unoccupied. It was a gaunt pile of red brick with no glass in the shuttered windows. Just the hiding-place for a secret foe. Neither of the children had ever had any doubt that this was the actual home of their unseen enemy.

Lady Agnes looked at it on this particular afternoon, and smiled at the remembrance of her childish fancies. Yet she was still child enough to regard the place with some suspicion. It was odd that it had not been let for so many years.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the dog, who hurriedly scrambled from her side and brushed his way through the bracken, barking cheerfully. In a few moments Lord Harry appeared. She arose and waved her hand to him. He strode through the bracken and smiled. But for all that there was an unwonted look of anxiety on his brown face.

"I am sorry, Agnes, to keep you waiting," he said, as he climbed up the heap of stones to her side, "but really, these politicians are most insistent people. My head is going round." He sat down by her side and looked so earnestly at her that she turned her eyes away to the north.

"I've been all right, Harry," she said. "I have been looking at the red castle, the home of our ancient foe." The young man laughed.

"It's been let," he said. "No more room for imagination in that quarter. I rode out there the other

day. There was glass in the windows, and the garden is being cleared up with a scythe."

"Who's taken it?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "A stranger to these parts, I should say. It is eight miles from a shop, you know."

"Thus end the dreams of our childhood," the girl said, with a smile. "I have no doubt he is a worthy man and will come to our garden-parties. Do you recollect, Harry, how we pictured him, a tall red-bearded scoundrel, with yellow teeth and rusty armour? If I remember right, he always crept, or slunk, or crawled."

"Yes, I remember," he replied gravely, "but I had spotless armour inlaid with gold, and I stood straight up to him and slew him before your eyes. I think your favourite dress was crimson velvet, trimmed with ermine?"

"It was, Harry, it was. Very hot in summer, and most unfashionable in colour. How funny these dreams of one's childhood are, Harry; how unpractical and how seldom realised."

"That's true, Agnes," he replied slowly, "yet there's one dream of my childhood that was very practical, and which could yet be realised. You were, if I remember right, always a princess, and generally in distress."

"Well, Harry?"

"Well," he said, in a low voice, "you are still a princess to me."

"But not in distress, Harry," she faltered, looking away from him, for she dared not look into his face.

"No, not exactly in distress," he said, "but not too happy. A princess with a stepmother—a sort of Cinderella—neglected——"

"With no ugly sister," she broke in.

"True," he replied, "but with a brother who wants the nonsense kicked out of him. It is a pity your father did not send Overcliffe to a public school."

"Poor Overcliffe."

"Well," the young man continued in a hesitating voice, "I am not exactly a prince, but—but—well, Agnes, you know what I am."

"A politician, I believe," she said archly, but still she did not venture to look him in the face. Her woman's instinct told her what was coming next.

"Damn politics," the young man cried fiercely. "I beg your pardon, Agnes, but you seem to think politics is everything. It appears to be a family failing."

Lady Agnes had no reply to make to this emphatic statement, and for a few moments both were silent. The girl was rapidly casting about for some means whereby she could lead her companion out of the difficult path he had chosen, and the young man was uncertain how best to proceed. The thread of the conversation was becoming slightly tangled.

"Agnes," he suddenly blurted out. Then he stopped, and his brown hand closed over her slender fingers. The colour flushed to her cheek.

"Agnes," he repeated softly and tenderly. But before he could say another word, the thunder of wheels

and hoofs, the rattling of chains, and the hoarse cries of a man burst upon their ears.

Lady Agnes started to her feet, glad of the opportunity to move from a somewhat embarrassing position, and ran down to the wall. Lord Harry followed her, cursing at the interruption. The noise grew louder and louder.

Looking along the road to the south, they saw three great horses with heads down, tearing madly along in a cloud of dust, and behind them an enormous dray, swaying from side to side, and a man standing up and leaning back on the reins with all his strength.

"A runaway!" cried Lord Harry. "Keep back from the wall, Agnes, for heaven's sake," and he pulled her away with some violence. He knew well enough that a swerve of the horses to the left would hurl all the contents of the dray on the top of them.

Another man had heard the clatter and cries along the road. He climbed out of the hatchway of one of the oyster-smacks and stood upon the deck.

A tall, broad-shouldered man, with a bronzed, weather-beaten face, and a golden beard and moustache. He was dressed in a blue jersey, blue serge trousers, and a pair of heavy fisherman's boots.

He came to the edge of the smack and glanced keenly at the runaway horses and then at the two figures behind the park wall. When the dray got within fifty yards of the onlookers, Lord Harry sprang lightly over the wall and crossed the road. He was an athlete, and, moreover, absolutely devoid of fear.

He thought it possible that he might catch the reins of the leader, and pull the whole concern to a standstill.

Lady Agnes cried out to him to come back, and the man on the smack yelled something out to him that he did not hear.

The horses came at him like an avalanche. He sprang at the reins of the leader and was swung off his feet.

If the horses had kept straight on he must inevitably have been trampled under their hoofs, but as luck would have it they caught sight of the girl's white dress and swerved sharply toward the creek, as though they had been struck broadside by a tornado.

Lord Harry was swung round like a stone in a sling, jerked off his hold and shot out half a dozen yards into the water. The driver went flying after him.

The contents of the van scattered and broke in every direction. The horses plunged a few yards through the mud, slipped, struggled to their feet, slipped again, rolled over and kicked furiously, churning the mud into a filthy black slime. The driver was pitched onto the leader's back, whence he ricocheted into a soft bed of mud two feet in depth.

He fell over and almost disappeared, but he rose unhurt, a filthy spectacle, spitting mud from his mouth and dripping with it from head to foot.

Lord Harry Quy was not so fortunate. The man on the smack kicked off the big boots and looked keenly at the foam-flecked water where he had disappeared. It was several seconds before he appeared on the surface,

and then he was some yards farther down the stream. He sank almost as suddenly as he had risen.

The man on the smack looked no longer, but dived into the swift tide and swam rapidly to the spot where the body had vanished. He had seen at a glance that the young man was either stunned or dead.

Once more the head appeared and vanished, this time but a few feet from the rescuer. The latter dashed through the water, and, diving down, caught the arm of the drowning man and brought him to the surface. The body was limp and still, and it was easy work to swim with it to the shore.

He did not touch bottom until he got into three feet of water, for to swim was mere child's play compared to walking through the mud. And then he lifted Lord Harry Quy onto his shoulder and carried him to the grass by the side of the road. Lady Agnes came to him with a white face.

"Is he—is he——" she faltered.

"He's all right," replied the man roughly; "run up to the house, that's a good girl, and get help; blankets, hot water, something to carry him up on. I will rub him down, and I'll bet he's smiling when you come back, but run like the devil, in case we don't happen to get him round." The girl turned without another word, and, clambering over the wall, disappeared from sight.

"Hi, you there," yelled the man to the driver, who had cut the traces and got his three horses to their feet, "just leave your damned horses, and lend a hand here.

They will walk out of the mud by themselves now, I guess."

The man came through the slime, a pitiable spectacle, black and odorous from head to foot, oozing mud from every part of his clothing.

The sailor gave him a few rapid instructions, and then, hurrying to one of the dingheys, pushed it off and sculled over to the smack. In less than two minutes he was on his way back, clothed in a dry jersey and trousers and with a bottle of brandy and a rough blanket in the bottom of the boat.

Then both men set to work with a will, and in less than ten minutes Lord Harry sighed and opened his eyes.

A quarter of an hour before the arrival of the relief party from the hall he was clothed in a borrowed serge suit and smoking a cigarette, and was chatting cheerfully to the man who had pulled him out of the water.

The sailor went over to the dray and gave a hand to the driver, who was trying to save some of his cases from the encroaching tide. The two men toiled hard at their task and succeeded in depositing most of the boxes on the road.

Two of them, however, defied their united efforts, and they lay half-buried in the black mud, with the tide eddying round them. One of the cases was broken, and it appeared to be full of metal castings of small cogs, bars of steel, bolts, screws and bits of the framework of some engine.

The three horses, black with mud and trembling from head to foot, watched the operations with apparent

unconcern, and grazed unfeelingly by the edge of the road.

Lord Harry Quy strolled down and looked at the address on the labels.

They were all consigned to the same person:

Mr. William Jordison,

The Red House,

Gorehaven,

Essex.

"Hum!" said Lord Harry to himself, "that's curious."

At last a number of people came crashing through the copse and scrambled over the edge of the wall.

Lady Agnes rushed up to Lord Harry and overwhelmed him with a torrent of questions: How did he feel? Was he cold? Was he feverish? Did his head ache? Was he wet? and so on. A crowd of servants from the hall, armed with blankets, hot-water bottles, brandy, whisky, stretchers, etc., stood sheepishly by, and looked in vain for some one who was in need of them.

It was with difficulty they could be restrained from applying a course of treatment to the driver of the dray. He acquiesced in the brandy, but drew the line at hot-water bottles.

"Agnes," said Lord Harry, when she had exhausted her torrent of questions, "let me introduce you to this gentleman, who has saved my life. We shall probably see much of him during the next few weeks. Mr. Arthur Holme—Lady Agnes Cliffe."

CHAPTER VII

THE RED HOUSE

Of all the lonely habitations in the eastern part of Essex, the Red House was the loneliest and least attractive. It did not stand, like Heatherstone Hall, on the edge of the marshes, with fair and fertile country stretching to the west of it.

It stood in the very centre of a desolate tract of land, on a small, rocky eminence that was like an island in a sea of marshes. To east and west and south and north the land lay flat and uninhabited, save for an isolated cottage, the home of some watchman or ferryman.

Not a tree broke the monotony of the landscape. On the eastern horizon lay the sea. On the west, six miles away, the rising ground showed up dim and indistinct, like a miniature range of mountains.

A straight road commenced at the mound and ran west between two creeks. It was closed in on either side with high banks of turf, for with spring tides and an easterly wind the water rose above the level of it, and, but for this protection, would have flooded it a foot deep from end to end.

This road, constructed at enormous expense by the man who built the house, ran inland for six miles, and then cut at right angles into the same road that ran past

Heatherstone Hall—a wide causeway that had been built in the time of the Romans, and had been maintained ever since as a communication between the north and south of Essex.

It was very little used, for in its whole course of twenty miles it scarcely touched on half a dozen villages, and a similar road which ran parallel to it, but several miles inland, was the main highway into Suffolk.

It was not surprising that the Red House had been unoccupied for many years. It had been built by a man who had been interested in the oyster-fisheries, and who thought it would be well to be near the spot where he had invested the money.

He lived there for ten years and then hanged himself from one of the upper windows facing the sea. He was a bachelor, and it was surmised that the awful loneliness of the place had unhinged his mind, for his business had prospered exceedingly, and there was absolutely no other reason for his suicide.

The house itself was as unattractive as the scenery that surrounded it—a great, bare building, badly constructed of very inferior bricks.

Behind it lay numerous outhouses and sheds, and a brick stable large enough to accommodate a dozen horses and as many carts or carriages. A tarred fence some three hundred yards in circumference enclosed a piece of ground which had once been a garden.

The knoll, on which the house stood, was about ten acres in extent, and was supposed to be the site of an old Roman camp. A faint square outline of trench

and rampart, plainly visible to the keen eye of the antiquarian, lent some colour to this supposition. And it was, at any rate, a commanding situation, such as might well have been chosen for military purposes. The two creeks ran round either side of the knoll, and, joining a couple of hundred yards farther on, spread out into the wide waters of the estuary. The place would have made an almost inaccessible fortress.

To this lonely spot, after fourteen years of hell in a convict prison, and eight years of feverish work in France, came John Porteous, now known to the world as William Jordison.

The hard work and simple fare of prison life had broadened his shoulders and strengthened his muscles. But his hair was white as snow, and the deep lines on his rugged face spoke eloquently of the mental anguish he had suffered.

For there had been more than the degradation of his punishment to sear John Porteous' mind. There had been the daily, almost hourly thought of the woman who had betrayed him.

There had been the secret locked tight within his breast, and which had gnawed at his heart and brain till the one was eaten away and the other was inflamed with disease.

John Porteous had gone into the prison a man who had indeed lost his honour, but who still retained many admirable traits of a fine and gentlemanly nature.

He came out of it a wild and ravening beast, insensible, save for the love he still bore his son, to every pas-

sion and emotion but revenge. A callous, cold-hearted ruffian, a monomaniac, who wanted only one thing in the world, and whose brain would never rest until he had found it.

When he left Portland he had a few pounds in his pocket, and he cast about in his mind how he could earn his living and make money. He did not want money for the pleasures that gold can buy, but because money is power, and without it he would be powerless to accomplish his task.

He spent several weeks looking for a job that offered some prospects in the future. He was a man of fine commercial capabilities, and with a few hundred pounds of capital he could doubtless have soon built up a business. But he was handicapped by want of money, and he realised that he had to start at the very bottom.

The idea of a clerkship was distasteful to him. He knew only too well how few chances came to a clerk, and how the most splendid abilities have rusted for years at the office desk.

He picked up an odd job here and there and kept himself alive, travelling about the country on foot from place to place. During this time he made diligent inquiries for his son.

He had no intention of making himself known to him, nor of asking for assistance, but his heart yearned for some news of the boy. He learned nothing, save that Mr. and Mrs. Behag were both dead, and that the boy had run away to sea.

He also made inquiries about Marie de la Mothe, but he found out absolutely nothing about her movements. He was hampered in his search by want of money, and resolved to wait until he could pay detectives to prosecute a systematic inquiry.

At last, after a long period of semistarvation, he found the opening that he required. At that time the motor-car industry was in its infancy in France, but astute men of business were already trying to grasp the future possibilities of the petrol-driven machine.

Capital was being slowly, but steadily, sunk in the business, and the only difficulty was the shortage of skilled labour. Labour has always been more conservative than capital, and has always fought shy of anything new.

It was a fortunate circumstance for John Porteous that mechanical engineering had been one of the hobbies of his earlier days. As a boy he had invested all his spare savings in little vertical and horizontal engines that had whizzed round wildly and perilously under the influence of methylated spirits.

At the age of sixteen he had been apprenticed to an engineering firm, and had remained there for two years at a salary of five shillings per week. Then his ideas of life had become enlarged, and, seeing no prospect of earning a living wage for several years, he had gone into a bank.

Engineering, however, remained his hobby, and he read much on the subject in his leisure hours, and had even made some small inventions, which were of no

practical value, but which stood in the same relation to his reading as problems do to the books of Euclid.

As things turned out, this harmless hobby proved of more value to him than all the years spent in the intricacies of banking. On the strength of his mechanical knowledge, he applied for and obtained a position with Jacquart et Cie., a new motor-car firm that had just been started in France.

He picked up the language in a few months, and before he had been there a year the directors recognised that they had got hold of a man who might do much for them, and whose mechanical skill was nothing compared to his commercial capabilities.

He was speedily transferred from the constructive to the executive part of the business, and before another two years had elapsed he found himself general manager of a fine business, with a liberal remuneration and a commission that brought him in three times his fixed salary.

Under his able management the business grew and thrived exceedingly. He invested his savings in the company. He was elected to a vacant seat on the board. Motors were then on the boom, and he raked in money hand over fist.

To the outer world he was a capable and successful business man. Few people could ever guess for what purpose he toiled and saved and grew rich. None knew of the fierce fires that burnt beneath the calm and calculating surface of his mind.

And he himself did not know the whole truth, for he did not guess that the seeds of insanity had been sown

in these fourteen years of humiliation and despair, and that the time of reaping was near at hand.

When he had saved thirty thousand pounds he retired from business and returned to England, bringing with him a fifty-horse-power car. He considered that it would be of assistance to him in his search.

He would have in it a speedy means of locomotion from place to place; he would be independent of trains and time-tables. He could scour the country from John O'Groat's to Land's End, and follow up every clue in person.

But no such clue came to William Jordison. The practised skill of detectives failed to discover anything of Marie de la Mothe or his son.

For six months he lived in London, and then, on one of his frequent tours through Essex, he saw the Red House, and the loneliness of it appealed to him.

He purchased it for a mere song, and decided to make it his headquarters. The noise of London was working horribly on his nerves, and the rush and hum of his motor-car gave the only relief from the ceaseless rattle of the traffic. He longed for silence where he could think.

He did not realise that it was unwise for him to think too much, and that the very distractions of a great city prevented him from brooding over his past life.

He sought rest. The Red House offered it almost as completely as a desert island might have done. It was, moreover in Essex, the county where young Richard Behag was last seen, and where presumably the first clue would be found by those who sought for him.

CHAPTER VIII

"RICHARD BEHAG IS DEAD"

William Jordison sat in a small room on the first floor of the Red House. It overlooked the eastern marshes, and from his chair he could see the sunlight sparkling on the ocean.

The chair was drawn up to a large deal table set close to the window. The table was covered with plans, pencils, rulers and compasses. He was measuring out fractions of a line with a diagonal scale.

The room was bare and comfortless. Its sole furniture consisted of a hard wooden chair, a table, and a row of plain deal shelves heaped up with papers. The walls were decorated with plans of machinery. On the top of the book-shelf was a half-finished working model of a motor-car nearly two feet in length.

William Jordison was playing with what had once been part of his daily work—the perfecting of a new invention which would reduce the cost of running a car to almost nothing, which would simplify the machinery, and which would generate a horse-power hitherto undreamed of in the trade.

The invention had been abandoned before it had been placed on a practical basis, and it was not until he had given up business that he turned to it once again. It

formed some relaxation from the serious purpose of his life.

Every now and then he looked up from the drawings on the table and gazed abstractedly out of the window, apparently lost in thought. On such occasions the lines round his mouth deepened and a heavy scowl darkened his forehead. Any one looking at him during these moments would have said that it was the face of a criminal—animal, brutal, debased in every feature.

Finally he threw the pencil down, tore up the drawing in front of him and rose to his feet. His playtime was over. He paced up and down the room with knitted brows and hands clasped behind his back.

In a few minutes' time there was a slow, heavy foot-step on the stairs outside. Then the door opened and a man entered. He was short and thick-set, with a low forehead, bestial mouth, and a sullen, clean-shaven face.

Jordison could not stand the sight of a woman in the house. He had three men-servants, and a more unprepossessing trio could scarcely have been chosen for the purpose.

They had been selected from the worst types of humanity, and were, in point of fact, three convicts who had escaped from Portland jail the year before. They served Jordison's purpose, however. Their faithfulness was practically assured, for the terrors of the law still hung over their heads.

Jordison's only fear was that they might choose to preserve their secret by killing him. He was prepared

for such an emergency. A loaded revolver was always to hand, in his pocket by day, under his pillow at night.

“Well, Lipp,” he said, as the man entered.

“Jermy’s just brought the second post from Gorehaven,” the man replied sullenly, holding out a letter in his dirty muscular fingers.

Jordison took the letter, and glanced at the handwriting. A flush came to his haggard face. The servant still waited, scowling as though he had received some insult.

“Well, Lipp,” said the master of the house, placing the letter in his pocket, “how are things going on?”

“They’re making an ’orrid mess in the garden, and they’re damned slow. I’ve bin round talking to ’em, and if I ’aven’t scared ’em, may——”

“Quite right, Lipp,” Jordison broke in; “any news from Gorehaven?”

“This damned election’s driving ’em all crazy. They collared Jermy and asked him to vote straight and true, and filled ’im up with drink.”

“Drink!” Jordison said sharply; “Jermy drunk? I’ll have no drunken blackguards about this house.”

“Drunk, lor’ bless yer. There ain’t a drink made that could fuddle old Jermy in an afternoon; ’is ’ead’s as clear as a bloomin’ bell. Swelp me——”

“That’ll do,” Jordison said sternly. “Have those castings come yet from Sheffield?”

“Those that ain’t in the mud,” the man replied with a grin, and he told the story of the accident in a few words, liberally sprinkled with high-coloured epithets.

Jordison appeared to take no interest in the narrative. However, he made a note on a piece of paper.

"See that I get the rest of the castings to-morrow, Lipp," he said quietly. "You may go." The man went, but when he reached the door his master called him back.

"Have they begun excavating for the bed of the engine-house, Lipp?"

"Not as I knows of. The 'ole place is in such a bloomin' mess that they might be going to dig a coal-mine."

"Well, tell Bysouth's foreman that I want it done at once, and that everything else must be postponed until it is finished. He has the plans. The engine will be here next week."

"Orl right, guvner. I'll make 'em jump," and the man slouched toward the door.

"And be civil with these people, Lipp," Jordison continued; "they're independent folk, and I don't want them to go off and leave me in the lurch."

"Orl right, guvner," the man replied without turning round. "I'll be as sweet as jam."

The door closed behind him with a crash, and the sound of his clumsy feet died away on the uncarpeted staircase.

Jordison smiled grimly. "A nasty customer," he said to himself. "I expect he had all the benefit of the doubt when the jury brought in a verdict of manslaughter. But he'll do for the present." He walked over to the window and sat on the table. Then he

pulled the letter out of his pocket, opened it, and perused it carefully. It ran as follows:

“DEAR SIR: We have at last obtained some clue to the movements of Mr. Richard Behag. It is certain that he embarked as a common seaman on the brig *Valetta*, bound for Valparaiso, and that he left the ship at that port. Further search will be expensive, as it will entail a journey to South America. Are you prepared to go on? It will probably cost you at least one thousand pounds, but we will cut down all expenses as much as possible. We enclose our account to date. A cheque will oblige.

“Your obedient servants,

“BRIGGS & WARLOCK.”

“One thousand pounds,” he murmured, and then he laughed and, sitting down at the table, filled in a telegram form.

“BRIGGS & WARLOCK, 21 Ship Street, Strand: Proceed with search. Spare no necessary expense.

“JORDISON.”

Then he rang the bell and glanced at the account. It came to three hundred forty-seven pounds ten shillings and three pence, of which more than half had been spent on the useless search for Mrs. de la Mothe. He smiled as he read some of the items; little trivial details of daily expenditure, pennies, sixpences, half-crowns, stretching

over pages and pages, and mounting up with extraordinary rapidity.

"If it costs me all I have," he said to himself, "I will see it through. There's lots more money to be had in the world."

In five minutes' time Lipp entered.

"Have the horse put in the dogcart at once, Lipp," said Jordison, "and get Jermy to drive you into Gorehaven. This telegram must go at once. Look sharp." He gave the man the telegram, and the latter left, mumbling something to himself. When he had gone, Jordison paced up and down the room. His face was flushed and his eyes sparkled with unwonted brilliancy.

"If I could only find him," he murmured. "If I could only find him, it might yet save me from this other search, and the duty that lies at the end of it." Jordison knew well that love for his son was the only redeeming trait in his character, and that this alone could drag him from the path he wished to tread.

The room seemed stifling, and he longed for the fresh air. He went down-stairs, and, crossing the garden, which looked like part of the London County Council improvements, made his way to the far end of the knoll.

The western sky was ablaze with crimson and gold, and the dreary marshes which stretched for miles round the Red House had acquired a strange beauty from the sunset. It was just past high tide on the distant coast, and every creek and pool and gully was full of water as far as the eye could reach.

The unsightly mud was concealed with a garment

that reflected all the glory of the sky. The barrenness of the land was clothed in a golden haze. Its very loneliness harmonised with the quiet of the eventide. The whole land breathed of peace. A few plovers flapped slowly from place to place, and their plaintive cries were the only sounds to break the silence.

Yet there was no peace in the heart of the man who gazed abstractedly across the marshes to the sea. Despair, revenge, the memory of those years spent in the lowest depths of hell, a brief thrill of hope at the news he had received that afternoon, all these were in his heart, but there was no peace.

Half a mile up the creek the sails of a yacht swelled in the faint west breeze, and seemed like the wings of some great white bird gliding over the golden waters.

As it came nearer, Jordison began to regard it with interest, and wondered why it had sailed so far up the creek. It was drifting down with the wind and tide, but it would scarcely make the sea before dark.

Nearer the boat came and still nearer, till Jordison could see the faces of the two men on the deck.

One was at the tiller and the other was loosing the jib halliard from its cleet. As they came opposite the house the bulging balloon jib came fluttering down in a crumpled heap of canvas, and a second later came the rattling of the anchor-chain as it ran swiftly over the bows. The man at the helm loosed the tiller and hauled in the main sheet. The boat swung round with the tide till her nose faced the west.

In less than ten minutes the men on board had stowed

sail and made everything snug for the night. Jordison frowned and, rising to his feet, walked slowly down the slope toward the creek. He was not pleased at the idea of the yacht anchoring under his windows.

Before he reached the edge of the water, one of the men had put off in the dinghey and was making it fast to an old post on the bank. Jordison stopped and leaned against the black tarred palings of his garden. He had no desire to converse with strangers. The man, however, crossed the road and came straight up to him.

"Are you Mr. Jordison of the Red House?" he asked abruptly.

"I am Mr. Jordison," was the curt reply.

"Well, I have got a couple of your cases here. Pitched into the mud the day before yesterday. Suppose you have heard all about it. You seem to take it coolly, though. No one's been near 'em till we decided to take 'em on board this morning. They were nearly out of sight in the mud, but we made fast to them, and waited till high tide. Then we pulled them aboard with our anchor-winch. You can have them when you like, but you must send some one on board to help get them off. I am Arthur Holme."

"I am much indebted to you, Mr. Holme," Jordison replied. "Will you come into the house? We are a little unsettled as yet, but still——"

"No, thanks," Holme replied, "I have got to cook our dinner yet. My man's a duffer at the household work, but, by gad, you should see him at the tiller in

dirty weather. There's not a man on this coast to touch him, I can tell you. Have you got any men about that can lend a hand with the cases when the tide runs out? I reckon we shall be high and dry then.”

“You will be stranded shortly after midnight, Mr. Holme. There is only a foot of water in the creek at low tide, and I suppose you draw five. I have three men here and I will send them across. It is a full moon to-night. Between the lot of us we ought to get the cases ashore. How's the electioneering going, Mr. Holme?”

“We are quite satisfied,” Holme replied. “By the by, I suppose you haven't a vote—too late to get on the register, eh?”

“I have no vote,” Jordison said, with a faint smile, “but if I had, I'd give it to your party. I'm of your way of thinking.”

“Well, you might do what you can for us. You don't speak, I suppose?”

“Not more than I can help,” Jordison replied grimly. “No, I'm afraid I cannot be of much service to you. I have a few tenants in East Wick, and I'll see that they vote for you right enough.”

“It is good of you,” Arthur Holme replied. “I have got the interests of this part of the world at heart. Land-owners don't understand these fisher-folk; I do. Quay seems a decent sort of chap, but I don't think he'll get in. I have been a sailor myself, and served before the mast. It's a damn rough life, but it's a good life, mark you, and it moulds good men out

of rotten material. Well, I will go and look after the dinner, and will turn in till you come on board. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mr. Holme," Jordison replied with sadness in his voice. This rough-bearded young fellow had brought with him the breath of the salt seas. It would have been hard to find a greater contrast to the general atmosphere of the Red House. To Jordison it brought back the days of his own youth, and the young man's voice touched some hidden chord in his hard, callous heart.

Then a sudden idea seized him, and hurrying after Holme's retreating figure, he came up to him as he was untying the dinghey's painter.

"Mr. Holme," he said quietly, "excuse me asking you a question, but you might be able to give me some information."

"Certainly," Holme replied, with a smile. "If I am able to do so."

"You have been a sailor and mixed with seafaring folk. Have you ever come across a young fellow of the name of Richard Behag?"

Arthur Holme did not answer. His back was to the west, where a faint glow of crimson still lingered. His face was in shadow, but to Jordison it seemed as if the young man remembered the name and was trying to recall the owner of it.

"Do you happen to recollect the name, Mr. Holme?"

Jordison continued.

"Yes," the young man replied, "I certainly recollect

the name. But for the moment—ah! I have it. Of course. I remember now.”

“If you know anything of him,” said Jordison, “I should be much obliged by the information. I mean him no harm.”

“It would not be much good if you did,” Holme answered, “for Richard Behag is dead.”

“Dead ” repeated Jordison in a low voice. “Are you sure? Have you proof?” And he caught the young man by the arm and peered anxiously into his shadowed face.

“I am sure,” Holme replied. “He died in Valparaiso. I remember the story now. It made something of a stir. He was drowned.”

“Drowned?” cried Jordison. “Are you sure?”

Holme shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes,” he replied, “drowned while yachting off Valparaiso. I should not inquire too closely if you are a friend of Behag’s. The whole story is not very creditable to him. You will excuse me now, Mr. Jordison. I am hungry. I will see you later,” and stepping into the dinghey, he put the rowlocks in place and loosed the painter.

Jordison did not stir. He wished to question the young man further, but Holme had cut the conversation short. He kept his eyes on the brown-bearded face which seemed all red and gold in the light of the setting sun. It was hard and stern. He wished he could see the eyes, but the young man had shipped his sculls, and was gazing at the bottom of the boat.

"Twelve o'clock," said Jordison pleasantly.

The young man looked up and smiled.

"That'll be all right," he answered. "Good-bye till then."

Jordison had taken a keen look at the man's eyes, and they had fallen guiltily from his glance. He turned back and walked slowly to the house.

"Dickie dead," he kept on repeating to himself. "Well, Briggs & Warlock will soon find out for me in Valparaiso, and if it is true I shall not lose sight of you, my young man. You know more of my boy's death than you have told me. I will find out the truth if it cost me every penny I have in the world." He turned and shook his fist at the yacht in the stream.

Then he went in and stumbled up to the small room that looked to the east, groping his way as though he could not see.

When he reached the table by the window he sank down in the chair, and buried his face in his hands. For ten minutes he did not move. His mind went back through all the years of agony and despair to the morning when he had last seen his son.

He could almost hear his own feeble imitations of the birds and animals of a farmyard.

"What do the fowls say, papa? I've forgot."

"Cluck, cluck, cluck, and cock-a-doodle-doo."

The wretched man rose to his feet and clenched his hands.

"If Dickie is dead," he murmured to himself, "there is only one thing left to me in life."

He sat down at the table and draughted a long telegram to Briggs & Warlock to be despatched first thing in the morning. The burden of it all was that no expense was to be spared to find proof of Richard Behag's death.

At midnight, Jordison and his three servants went down to the creek. It was a dark night, but there was sufficient light to see that the yacht had moved from her anchorage. Lipp threw the rays of his lantern over the mud and across the narrow channel to the farther shore.

The two cases lay half a dozen yards from the bank. They were still wet and had evidently been thrown overboard into the water, which had gone down, and left them on the sloping bed of the creek.

It was clear that for some reason or other Arthur Holme had taken advantage of the falling tide to haul up his anchor and drift down the channel.

The business had an ugly look in Jordison's eyes. But he said nothing to his men, and they all four worked hard to get the cases onto the bank. They were embedded in two feet of slime, and the men found the task too much for them.

After several vain efforts they gave up the task, and breaking the case open, transferred the contents piecemeal to the shore.

William Jordison toiled furiously, and did as much work as the other three men combined. He had an idea that severe physical exertion would distract his thoughts. But he found it impossible to get rid of the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

And all the time he was going to and fro through the

mud, black to his knees, sweating with the burden of some great piece of iron, he was wondering why Arthur Holme had left so suddenly. By the time the work was over he decided that the young man had shirked another meeting and further questions.

And he strongly suspected that Arthur Holme knew more of the death of Richard Behag in Valparaiso than he cared to disclose.

CHAPTER IX

NEW FRIENDSHIPS

During the next three months many things of importance occurred, which can only be briefly touched upon in this narrative.

Lord Harry Quy was elected member for the eastern division of Essex by a narrow margin of three votes. The "oldest inhabitant" could not recall so keen and exciting a contest.

Yet it was a contest singularly free from personal animosity, and was waged with such consideration and courtesy on either side that the more acrimonious of both parties looked on the two candidates as singularly deficient in the art of sword-play. Yet nothing that could be fairly done was left undone.

In many cases two solid hours were devoted to the conversion of some deaf old man, who knew nothing of politics and cared less. The cause received no mercy on either side. It was made clear to every one in the district that both the Liberal and the Conservative policies were the creations of the devil himself.

The bewildered fishermen and cottagers had only to decide which was the worst. In the end Stacey Clarke lost the seat by five votes, which a re-count reduced to three. William Jordison smiled when he saw the result,

for the seven votes he had promised to Arthur Holme were given to Lord Harry Quy.

These events concerned the outside world, but other matters, of even more importance to the private individuals in this story, took place during these three months.

In the first place a thing happened that was known only to two people. Lord Harry, on the strength of his parliamentary success, asked Lady Agnes Cliffe to be his wife. She refused his offer, tearfully and pathetically, as though afraid of the consequences.

He had been her friend from childhood, and she dreaded the rupture of the friendship. But Lord Harry Quy took the blow like a man. He laughed away her tears, kissed her hand, and left her with the assurance that what had happened would not in any way alter the good-fellowship that had hitherto existed between them.

Lord Harry, for his part, had no intention of cutting himself adrift from her society. He had not yet given up all hope, though he knew in his heart that they could never be such good and close friends as they had been in the past, unless they became something more than friends in the future.

In the second place, Lord Harry Quy and Arthur Holme had conceived a strong affection for each other.

This was necessarily kept in the background during the strenuous times of electioneering, but, directly the contest was over, they let their feelings have full play, to the scandal of the narrowminded of both parties, who

could not conceive a union of personal friendship and political animosity.

The friendship was in many ways a strange one. It was true that Holme had saved Lord Harry's life, but a debt of gratitude does not as a rule make for real friendship, and the dissimilarity of their two characters would seem to have stood in the way of anything but a general acquaintance.

Arthur Holme was a young man who took life very seriously. His whole heart had been in the election, and he was bitterly disappointed at the result. Lord Harry Quy, on the other hand, did not care a penny for politics, and would just as soon have been a Liberal as a Conservative, if the father of Lady Agnes Cliffe had been of the former way of thinking.

Arthur Holme, moreover, was grim and saturnine for so young a man, while Lord Harry was the very essence of geniality. The latter, again, was of high birth. The very parentage of the former was wrapt in obscurity. He had sprung from nowhere, a man without name or reputation. He had to stand entirely on his personal qualities. It was a strange irony of fate, indeed, that made these two fast friends.

One result of this friendship was subsequently destined to have far-reaching consequences. Arthur Holme received more than one invitation to accompany Lord Harry to Heatherstone Hall. The Earl of Heatherstone could be gracious to a fallen foe, for this, indeed, is one of the easiest of human virtues.

He was pleased to bestow his patronage on the agent

of the defeated Liberal candidate. Mrs. Maxwell-Frinton compared him to a Roman victor, who liked to drag about a prisoner at the wheels of his chariot. But, as a matter of fact, Lord Heatherstone's attitude was not entirely that of the conqueror. For all his pride and pomposity he was a keen judge of men, and he saw in Arthur Holme certain qualities that would be very useful to the Conservative cause, if they could be directed into the right channel. Lord Heatherstone's family had been trained through generations to see far across the political horizon.

And he foresaw in the near future one of those great political upheavals wherein men of all parties are shuffled together and dealt out in two new packs. In such a crisis, a young man like Holme, a man of high ideals, would be a valuable adherent.

Holme, on his part, did not respond very warmly to these advances. But his insight into the future was nearly as keen as that of the noble Earl, and he saw a possible advantage to himself from an apparent friendship with the great house of Heatherstone. He was a young man who could not afford to throw away a chance.

And so it came to pass that Arthur Holme was frequently at Heatherstone Hall, and before very long one member of the family began to look forward to his visits with more eagerness than prudence.

Lady Agnes Cliffe had no excuse whatever for the interest she began to take in this somewhat rough and surly young man, whom Lord Harry had brought to the house.

He admired her beauty, and saw much to love in her disposition, but, regarding her in the light of a possible wife for his friend, he went out of his way to dismiss her from his thoughts, and to avoid any unnecessary conversation with her.

Lord Harry's feelings in this quarter were plain and manifest, and Arthur Holme was strong-minded enough to avoid any possible temptation, which might lead him to interfere with his friend's happiness.

He noticed with some uneasiness that Lady Agnes had begun to regard him with interest, and he secretly resolved that his visits to Heatherstone Hall would have to become less frequent. The girl was too proud and modest to give any outward indication of her feelings, but for all that Holme instinctively felt that he was occupying her thoughts rather more than was desirable for either of them.

Lady Agnes, on her part, would have laughed if any one had told her that she was beginning to think too much about a young man of unknown parentage and rather unprepossessing manners.

She deluded herself into the idea that she was a student of human character, and that this particular specimen interested her by reason of its rarity in her own sphere of life.

Most of the young men she knew—and many young men fluttered around Heatherstone Hall—were of two entirely different types: the one well-set, well-groomed young fellows, mostly sportsmen and athletes; men careless of serious matters, but trained to a nicety in the

choice of a dog, a horse, or a gun; gentlemen of honour and reputation, all of them, for Lord Heatherstone was careful what men he asked to the house; not foolish nor vacuous, but singularly devoid of any definite purpose in life. The other class were political young men, many of them keen and intellectual, but all self-seeking and subservient to the great Lord Heatherstone; the "rising hopes of the Tory party," each with his own axe to grind, and more than one of them with an eye to the advantages that might accrue to him if he could marry the Lady Agnes Cliffe.

Arthur Holme was like none of these men. In many respects he was inferior, but the girl found something in him that coincided with her own views of life.

She had grown up to believe herself a democrat, a friend of the oppressed lower classes, and, like most ladies of rank who espouse the cause, she believed the poor were much more miserable and oppressed than they really are.

Her social views were unsound, but her practical exposition of them gained her many humble friends in the county. She went about doing good, and there was no doubt that she won Lord Harry his seat in Parliament.

Now Arthur Holme was also a friend of the people, and therein lay a real solid bond between these two, yet one that was weak in comparison to the links of steel that Time was forging for them on his anvil.

CHAPTER X

A BURIED PALACE

When Jordison had despatched the telegram to Messrs. Briggs & Warlock, he tried to thrust the matter from his mind, and threw himself heart and soul into the construction of his new motor-car.

Day after day he shut himself up in the little room that looked out over the eastern marshes, and night after night he sat at the deal table till his brain grew too weary to think, and the plans and figures swam before his eyes.

Happy is the mind that can forget its sorrows in work or dull its pain in sheer weariness of physical exertion. Jordison worked hard and he worked late, but he could not forget that his work was far removed from the purpose of his life.

Never an hour passed in which he did not turn away from the papers before him, and think of the son that was lost to him; of the woman with whom he had yet to settle a long-standing account.

And even his wife had her place in these movements of remembrance. He could plainly see the bowed head on the desk, feel the stiffened arms, and read from the tear-stained page the poem he had marked for her in the days of their courtship.

It was the curse of his life that he could not forget.

He fought with the memories, and beat them down into oblivion, and turned to his work with renewed energy.

The pangs were short, for he stifled them, but they were insistent and inevitable—two or three minutes, perhaps, out of each hour, but every second of these minutes full to the brim with pain.

Yet for all these interruptions, Jordison's mind worked with mechanical precision. It was the mind of an expert moving steadily in a fixed direction, neglecting no chance that might lead to ultimate success, weighing every possibility, working out every calculation with exactitude.

The moments came when all the work became a chaos and figures and plans were whirled away like dust in a storm. But the rest of the time Jordison's mind was calm and even. Every line was drawn true and firm, every calculation was absolutely accurate, even to ten places in decimals.

And success came to Jordison at last, as it comes to most men with an earnest purpose. The whole of one day and the whole of one night he sat at his deal table and made calculations and measured lines and drew plans to scale.

And when the grey light of morning came through the window it showed a white face still poring over a growing heap of papers, a white haggard face with a gleam of triumph in the restless eyes. And on paper the motor-car had become an accomplished fact.

Jordison was no dreamy inventor, but a practical workman. All the time he had been toiling with his

brain, others had been toiling with their hands. Before he had completed his invention, the engine-house was built, the engine installed, a lathe fixed up, and a brick furnace erected.

Two practical mechanics were engaged, and everything was ready for the fitting together of the machinery before the whole design had assumed a definite form.

Directly Jordison's brain had accomplished part of its task, the work of construction commenced, and the framework of the car was completed before the finishing touches had been put to the plans for the machinery. Every week castings came in from various firms with whom the orders had been placed. These were filed and finished off and fitted together in the workshop.

In less than three months from the date when the first castings had been thrown into the creek, the car was completed, and Jordison sold his fifty horse-power Jacquart for nine hundred pounds.

On October 25th Jordison took the first run on his new motor. It was blowing half a gale, pouring with rain, and the roads were deep in mud and water. It was a severe test for the new car, but she came through it splendidly and ploughed through the storm like a ship through a heavy sea, throwing up a shower of mud, like spray, on each side of her. Jordison revelled in the ride.

The wind and rain lashed him like a whip, but he drove through it all at the top speed, and gloried in the power of his new-found joy. He was an experienced motorist, and knew, before he had gone half a dozen

miles, that no one had ever driven such a car as this before.

For three hours he sat with his hand on the steering wheel, and in that time they had traversed Essex from north to south and east to west. Lipp sat shivering and cursing by his side.

He was there to learn all about the monster that jumped and quivered beneath him. He was commencing his education as a chauffeur. But he only took a feeble interest in the proceedings; and while Jordison explained the art of driving, his whole mind was occupied with wondering when the car would be scattered in pieces over the roadway.

For, like many experts, Jordison cut his corners very close indeed.

Lipp's face did not brighten until they came within sight of the Red House. The ugly building on the little hill had never appeared in so attractive a light to him before. No mariner returning from a stormy voyage could have welcomed the first glimpse of home with greater joy and thankfulness.

Then, as they rushed along the straight road, the hill in front of them was suddenly hidden in a flash of blinding light. A few seconds later a loud report burst on their ears, and the ground trembled beneath them.

Instinctively Jordison put on the brake, just as a man shuts his eyes to protect them from danger, not stopping to reason whether he will come to harm or not.

The great car slowed down, and, peering through the driving rain, the two occupants saw a heavy cloud of

smoke pouring across the marshes, and long tongues of fire leaping up from the hill.

"The dynamite," said Jordison hastily. A large supply of this dangerous material had been stored near the engine-house. Jordison had proposed to blast out a cave in the solid rock close to the road, where he could keep his motor and a large store of petrol.

"I've 'ad enough of your cursed motor," growled Lipp. "I only wish it had been in the shed, and Gawd bless the dynamite then, I say. I'd like to see it in smithereens."

Jordison smiled sweetly. Then he released the brake, pulled the lever toward him, and the car glided forward.

"You will get used to it, Lipp," he said, "and there's always a chance of its going to smithereens, as you so aptly express it. A foot too much to one side or the other at ninety miles an hour will do a lot to gratify your desire."

"Motor folk are a pack of damned fools," rejoined Lipp, clinging to the side of the car, as Jordison purposely drove one wheel within an inch of the bank.

"I would not worry if I were you, Lipp. You have got other things to think of to-day. The petrol is all ablaze. I hope the house has not come down. Can you see anything?" Lipp leaned forward and glared at the hill, but it was still hidden in smoke and flames.

"Nothing," mumbled Lipp; "I only hope it's killed Susanson, the little swine."

In less than five minutes the car came to a standstill

at the gate. The wind was from the southwest, and the smoke was carried away from them, but it hid the Red House from view.

Jordison did not much care whether any one was killed or not, but he was very thankful that the car was finished, and that it had not been blown to pieces in the explosion.

A large supply of petrol had been stored near the engine-house. That very afternoon he had intended to remove it to a safer place. It had now removed itself, and in all probability most of the engine-house as well.

He had no desire to plunge into the thick and awful smoke and investigate matters. He sounded the horn on the car a dozen times and waited for information.

In two minutes' time Jermy appeared round the bottom of the hill. He was black with oily soot from head to foot. His right cheek was bleeding, and he limped.

"Well, Jermy," said Jordison, "is there much damage done?"

"Curse you, and your—motors," the man growled, echoing Lipp's sentiments almost to the very words in which they had been expressed. "'Arf a brick's caught my leg, and a bit of somethin' 'as grazed my cheek, and——"

"I am not anxious about you, Jermy," Jordison broke in abruptly; "what about the house?"

"It stands," Jermy replied. "I've not been in it, and shan't till the smoke's gone. The engine-house is now an' ole in the ground, as far as I can see."

"Where's Susanson?"

“ ‘Iding in a ditch, and calling down the wrath of ‘eaven on yer ‘ead.”

Jordison laughed. At any rate the Red House was not in ruins. He had no further use for the engine-house. Then his voice grew stern.

“Who’s been fooling with the dynamite?” he said abruptly.

“Better ask Susanson,” the man replied. “He’s been poking about in the shed all the morning.”

For three hours the men waited and watched the smoke pour away toward the east. The air was full of smuts and their faces grew black with soot.

From where they sat they could feel the fierce heat of the blazing petrol. Half a dozen times they worked their way round the foot of the hill, and tried to ascend the other side to the house.

But the thick smoke drove them back, and they realised that they would have to wait until the fire had burnt itself out.

During this period of waiting they had several visitors. Men came up on carts and bicycles, some even in boats, all anxious to discover the cause of the great column of smoke that had been seen for miles round like the pillar of cloud that had guided the Israelites in the wilderness.

But each and all were courteously sent about their business. Jordison explained the disaster in a few words, and expressed his capability to deal with it without any aid but that of his servants.

Toward dark the blazing spirit burnt itself out. The flames dwindled down to flickering sheets of blue,

sweeping along the ground and spouting up from the crevices where the petrol still lay hid. The dense volume of smoke died away into a thick stream of vapour that the wind scattered as soon as it formed.

Susanson emerged from his hiding-place and came crawling up with request for food and water.

He was questioned as to the explosion, but nothing could be got out of him. Both Lipp and Jermy kicked him, and Jordison did not interfere. Then all four men made their way to the Red House.

In the fading light they could see the ravages wrought by the explosion. The engine-house was, as Jermy had said, a mere hole in the ground, a pit of smoking débris. From it, as from the centre of a star, ran great cracks and fissures in the rock, some nearly two feet in width.

The Red House itself still stood, but there was not a pane of glass in the windows, and not a chimney left standing on its roofs. The walls were seamed with narrow cracks, and the whole building leant two or three degrees out of the perpendicular.

On two sides it was as black as though it had been built of coal, but it had fortunately been beyond the reach of the flames, and only the smoke had touched it.

Within they found a veritable chaos. Most of the ceilings had come down in a shower of plaster, and the bare laths showed through like the bones of a skeleton. Pictures, ornaments, and crockery lay heaped on the floor, the wallpaper was covered with ominous lines, and every room that the oily smoke had penetrated was black with soot.

Jordison made a careful inspection of the walls, and came to the conclusion that there was no immediate danger to the main structure of the house.

He sent off Jermy and Susanson to prepare a meal, for they had eaten nothing since breakfast, told Lipp to stop up the windows of the dining-room with canvas, or whatever else he could find, and then, lighting a lantern, made his way down into the cellars.

He had yet to satisfy himself about the foundations of the house. He descended the stone steps cautiously, holding the lantern above his head and examining the walls on either side. One of the steps had been displaced and rocked as he placed his foot upon it.

The cellar itself was cut out of the solid rock, faced with brick, and paved with flagstones. Jordison threw the light of the lantern carefully round as he stood at the bottom of the steps. The floor was littered with broken glass and swimming with wine. He placed his hand in it and drew it out dripping and crimson. Six dozen bottles of claret had been flung out from their bins and dashed to pieces.

He picked his way among the *débris* and carefully examined the floor and walls. There were two narrow fissures in the brickwork and one deep crack across the stone flags. The force of the explosion must have been terrific. It seemed probable that the whole mass of rock on which the house stood had been cracked in every direction.

Then suddenly, as Jordison stood on one of the broken flagstones, it tilted and split. The ground

seemed to sink away under his feet, and there was the sound of falling rock beneath him. Quick as thought he flung himself back and clutched one of the wine-bins on the wall. The woodwork lurched toward him and the bottles flew from their places. Underneath his feet the ground dropped away, and he could hear bottles and pieces of stone falling into some cavity beneath. He tried for a foothold, and the wine-bin moved another degree outward. Then he hung still, and felt the whole structure lean farther and farther from the wall.

At last it ceased to give, but trembled in the balance. Three yards to the left the overturned lantern lay on solid stone. He thanked God that it still gave light. He acted quickly. Hand-over-hand he moved along the wine-bin. With every movement it quivered and seemed about to fall over into the depths below. But it held till his legs struck the edge of the hole. With a final effort he drew himself up on the floor, and rolled over and over toward the light. As he did so, the wine-bin came toppling over, and far below he heard the crash of broken glass.

He crawled to the foot of the steps and lay there panting for breath. He did not understand what had happened, but it seemed to him as though the whole world was crumbling away beneath his feet. He knew that he must ascend the steps. Yet for the moment he could not stir, but lay inert, helpless, motionless as a log. His clothes were soaked with wine, and the fumes of it rose to his brain.

Then with a violent effort he roused himself, sprang

to his feet, and touching the walls on either side of him, as though afraid that they would elude his hands, staggered up the stairs.

That night they all slept in the loft over the stables. Jordison told them plainly that the house itself might fall through the crust of the earth at any moment.

But the next morning Jordison told Lipp to get a rope and a couple of lanterns. He was determined to investigate what lay beneath the cellar and find out for himself whether it would be safe to remain any longer in the Red House.

Lipp made the rope fast to one of the bars of the pantry windows at the head of the stairs, and taking the heavy coils on his arm, moved cautiously down to the cellar, and flung them into the black gulf that yawned beneath him. They could hear the rope strike the bottom, and knew that it was long enough for their purpose. Then Jordison placed a rug beneath the rope and the jagged edge of the broken flagstones, and, hanging the lantern round his neck, lowered himself hand-over-hand into the pit.

When he had descended about twenty yards his feet found foothold on the bottom, and he called out to Lipp, who proceeded to follow him. Jordison watched the spark of light descending like a star through the darkness, until the servant reached his side. The floor beneath them was strewn with *débris*, broken rock, and flooring, spattered with glass and drenched with wine. The bin lay two yards away from them, a crushed and splintered frame of woodwork.

Jordison wedged one of the lanterns firmly between two pieces of rock and took the other from Lipp's hand. He picked his way carefully through the fallen glass and stone till he reached a wide expanse of smooth floor, stretching as far as the light would penetrate. He stooped down and examined it. Then he brushed away the layer of dust that covered it, and gave an exclamation of surprise. For underneath this soft carpet spread by the hand of nature through many centuries, appeared the regular squares of a tessellated pavement, black and red alternately, highly glazed and beautifully designed. In a moment he knew that he had made a discovery of great archæological interest. Without a doubt the place, whatever purpose it served, was the work of the Romans.

A closer inspection revealed a large chamber nearly one hundred feet square. The walls were smoothly chiselled from the solid rock, but here and there a deep rough hollow in the surface showed that the room was a natural cavity in the hill, and that the hand of man had merely planed and shaped it to its present regular form. In places the faint outlines of frescoes were visible on the walls, but time had reduced the paint to a dull blur of colour, an indistinct shadow of what had once been, perhaps, the work of a great artist.

Jordison was less interested in archæology than in the safety of his house. And the most beautiful frescoe in the world would not have distracted his attention from a crack in the rock that lay beneath it. By the feeble light of the lantern he scanned every inch of the

surface within view. He discovered two small fissures on opposite sides of the chamber. From the position of the light he had left burning at the foot of the rope he calculated that the crack was continuous from one side of the room to the other, and that it ran through the hole in the cellar floor. It was evident that the rock had given way at its weakest point.

On one side of this great chamber there was a large opening ten feet square, and on the other a smaller one no bigger than an ordinary doorway. The two men explored the latter first, and found that it led into another room about twenty feet by sixteen feet, and twelve feet high. This again led into another and yet another apartment. In all there were seven rooms of various sizes, and each of them a joy to the antiquarian. The tessellated pavement in one of them surpassed in beauty anything of the sort that had ever been found in the British Isles. It was a dull purple, veined with gold, and the gold beneath its glaze was as bright as the day it had been laid on by some Roman craftsman.

Traces of the vanished occupants were few and far between. Half a dozen pieces of pottery, three brass coins with indecipherable inscriptions, a piece of steel that might once have been part of the blade of a sword, thick piles of dust, sown with small nails, perhaps all that was left of the luxurious couches and richly carved tables. These, with one exception, were all that the masters of the world had left behind them.

This exception lay in the last room of all, a tiny

chamber scarcely ten feet square. Here, half hidden in a great heap of dust, lay the bones of a man. The fleshless fingers of his right hand still touched a small bone cross. God only knows what tragedy of faith lay hidden in this silent tomb.

Jordison and Lipp betrayed no interest in their discoveries, and retracing their steps, commenced to explore the larger opening on either side of the great hall. It proved to be a mere tunnel, sloping downward into the earth. The roof and walls were rough and irregular, varying in height and width to such an extent that it was quite evident that the passage was the work of nature and not of man. The latter, however, had done good work on the floor. This had been smoothed down to a surface at least as good as a country road. Neither Lipp nor Jordison noticed the remarkable difference between the floor and the walls. But an expert would have told them that the Romans were a military nation, and whereas they cared nothing for what lay above or on either side of them, they cared much for the surface that their soldiers had to march over.

The tunnel apparently led to no further chambers, but ran on in a straight line toward the east. When the two men had traversed it about half a mile, it ceased to slope downward. They walked on for an hour, and still did not come to the end of the passage. It began to curve and wind in various directions. But Jordison consulted a small compass which hung on his watch-chain, and found that the general trend of the passage was still toward the east. Lipp was for turning back,

but Jordison insisted on going forward. His curiosity was aroused. He guessed that the tunnel did not lead aimlessly into the bowels of the earth.

They walked on for another hour, Lipp cursing at every step they took, and even Jordison began to wonder whether they had better not retrace their steps. His opinion of the Romans neared a vanishing point. It seemed a lamentable waste of time and energy to construct a road of this sort.

At last they came to the end of the passage. It terminated, not in a blank and solid wall, but in a heaped-up pile of rock. The roof had fallen in and barred all further progress. It was impossible to tell whether the end was just beyond the barrier, or whether the tunnel still ran miles farther into the east. As far as Lipp and Jordison were concerned, this was the end. Yet Jordison fancied that some air percolated through the heap of broken stone that lay in front of him, and the candle, burnt almost to the socket, flickered gently when he opened the front of the lantern.

There was nothing more to be done, and certainly nothing more to be seen. Jordison put a new candle in the lantern, and the two men retraced their steps. It was nearly dark when they emerged from the cellar and breathed the fresh air again.

Neither Lipp nor Jordison attached any importance to their day's work. The former characterised it as "a damned piece of tomfoolery." The latter could not make up his mind whether the house rested on a safe foundation or not. Certainly neither of them guessed

that their future existence would depend on the handiwork of men who had died before the dawn of civilisation in England.

Yet even then beneath the débris of plaster in the hall of the Red House lay a letter which the postman had slipped through the slit in the door the previous afternoon, and which was destined to direct William Jordison's career into a channel of which he had not as yet the faintest knowledge, and for which as yet he had not the faintest desire.

CHAPTER XI

A RUINED MAN

Jordison and his servants spent the next three days in converting the spacious stables into a temporary residence, in shifting furniture, and in endeavouring to adapt themselves to circumstances. The Red House was palpably unsafe. Jordison had no means of gauging the thickness of the rock that lay beneath it, but if, as he feared, that rock was cracked in half from end to end, it was probable that the whole building would one day crash through into the cavern beneath it.

It was not until the third day after the disaster that Lipp, carrying a washing-stand on his brawny shoulder, stumbled in the débris at the hall-door and turned up a letter from the pile of glass and plaster on the floor. He brought it to Jordison in the harness-room, which the latter had fitted up as his own particular sanctum.

Jordison looked at the postmark and saw that it was three days old. But he opened it without any feelings of annoyance at the delay. On the outside the letter was dull and uninteresting—a business envelope, addressed in a clerk's handwriting. But, before he had finished reading it, his face was as white as the paper it was written on, and he rose to his feet with a look of fear and rang the bell.

When Jordison had returned to England some months previously, he had resigned his seat on the board of the motor company, but decided to leave all his savings in a business which promised so well, and which he had himself built up to a high position in the motor world. The other directors were men of integrity and ability, and he had every reason to believe that he had left his money in safe hands.

This letter, however, broke in upon his security like a thunderbolt. It was written by a crabbed and methodical old French lawyer, who had been something of a friend to Jordison in Paris. The following is a translation:

"DEAR MR. JORDISON: I write to tell you that Jacquart et Cie. are on their last legs. Sell your interest before the news becomes public property. The Jew financier, whom we supposed to be wealthy, and who has, as you know, taken your place on the board, has played ducks and drakes with the whole concern. He enlarged the business to such an alarming extent that the other directors refused to sanction the expenditure without some personal guarantee for the additional capital that would be required. This guarantee was given by Jules Lanstein, and the company has shone splendidly on the strength of it. But I happen to have found out that this Lanstein is an adventurer who lives by his wits, and that his guarantee is not worth the paper it is written on. I have ascertained this for a fact, and all Paris will know it before the week is out. The com-

pany has committed itself to enormous payments. Pay-day will arrive shortly. Sell by telegram at once. The shares stand high.

"With my most profound salutations, I am, my dear Mr. Jordison, yours,

"HENRI DUCHELLE."

Jordison read and reread the letter again and again, in the hope that he had not translated it correctly, and that he might have missed the true purport of its contents. But they were too clear, and he roused himself for action. Lipp entered the room in answer to the bell. Jordison wrote out a telegram to some brokers in Paris, instructing them to sell all his holding in the Jacquart company, but to do it in such a manner as to least disturb the market. And then he told Lipp to get the motor-car ready. But scarcely had the man left the room, when a boy rode slowly up on a red bicycle and delivered a telegram at the door. It was brought up to Jordison, who tore it open, and took in its contents at a glance.

"Jacquart in liquidation. Shares unsalable. Hope you have sold already.

"DUCHELLE."

The thin piece of pink paper fluttered gently to the floor from Jordison's fingers. He sat as still as though he had been carved out of stone. His white face was drawn and haggard, a mere pale mask of flesh, with two burning eyes that were fixed on the dirty panes of the little window. "Shares unsalable, shares unsalable,"

echoed and re-echoed through his brain. Yet he could not grasp the full meaning of the words, till his eye fell on Bysouth's account, which he had received that morning, and which lay open on the table. One hundred and seventy-five pounds! These figures were concrete facts and easily to be comprehended. Here was a bill that had to be paid at once, and yet perhaps but a mere fraction of the bill that might have to be paid to Messrs. Briggs & Warlock before they obtained the information he desired. The piece of paper brought the truth home to him—the hard, incontrovertible truth. He was a ruined man, a powerless, feeble, helpless man. The ground had been knocked away from under his feet. His brain and limbs were bound by poverty. He would never know if his son were dead or alive. He would never find Marie de la Mothe, nor press his hard fingers into her white throat, as he had dreamed of year after year in his prison-cell. He was an inert log on the ocean of life, a piece of driftwood that can neither move where it will nor sink into oblivion beneath the waves. The truth was gradually driven home into his brain like a piece of red-hot steel. Ruin! Ruin! Ruin! The word sang through his brain until it seemed to rhyme in with the beating of his heart. He could stand the music no longer. For a whole hour he had listened to it in silence, a mere statue, beaten with it as a rock is lashed with waves. He suddenly staggered to the tiny table, sank into a chair, bowed his head, raised it again and looked into the fire. Then his hand stole into his pocket, and he felt the cold steel of his revolver.

For a few minutes he fingered it lovingly, as though it were indeed a friend. Then he laughed bitterly, and tried to collect his thoughts. Was this the only way?

He placed the weapon on the table before him and looked at it inquiringly, as though it could give him an answer from its small round mouth. It was silent, though he could have made it speak one answer in its own decisive way. He thrust it far from him, among the papers on the table, and rose to his feet. His brief spell of madness was past. His strong will reasserted itself. Rage and disappointment were thrust into the background. He was the old William Jordison again, cold, hard, calculating, a man with a purpose that no accident nor untoward circumstance could alter. He paced up and down the room with knitted brows, and a mouth closely tight with determination. "Money! Money! Money!" was the song that now echoed through the brain.

A hundred schemes for making money flashed through his mind, and one by one he cast them aside. Some were uncertain, some required capital, and all were too slow, far, far too slow. The best of them would mean seven years' servitude for his Rachel, the love that he hugged to his heart, the accomplishment of his revenge.

His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Susanson, the most despicable of the three precious scoundrels he had chosen for his servants. He was a little Jew, plump and self-satisfied, an excellent cook, for he had once been chef in a large restaurant, where he lost his situation and liberty by defrauding his em-

ployers out of one thousand pounds in various accounts with tradesmen. He received twelve months' imprisonment and came out with a distaste for the culinary art. He then turned his attention to high-class burglary, and found the occupation a remunerative one in which his confederates bore all the risk. An unfortunate miscalculation, however, on his part, and the treachery of a man who had some old scores to settle, made a blank of five years in his life. It should properly have been seven, but he interfered with the arrangements of a prejudiced government, and took his present situation as a place of refuge. He had every intention of leaving it as soon as he had made other arrangements. His life was not exactly a happy one at the Red House. The other two men looked down on him as an inferior type of criminal, and they kicked him into the position of a general drudge.

He came in, as he usually did, with some whining complaint about his fellow-servants. He had a wholesome fear of Jordison, but he knew that the master of the house was determined to keep order in his own household.

"If you pleathe, thir," he lisped.

Jordison stopped and gave him a glance that sent the miserable fellow's heart into his boots.

"If you pleathe, thir," he repeated nervously.

"Well," said Jordison sharply, "what is it?"

The man plunged into a long and doleful tale to Jermy's discredit. Jordison scarcely listened to the details, but he gathered that owing to Jermy's conduct

the dinner hour would have to be altered by forty-five minutes. Directly he had arrived at that fact he stopped the story.

"That'll do," he said roughly. "I'll speak to Jermy, but see that I get dinner at the proper time, or there'll be trouble."

"I'll try, thir; swelp me bob, I'll try, thir."

"Get out."

The man crawled out of the room, and Jordison was left alone with his thoughts.

A very trivial event will sometimes alter the whole course of a man's life, and it so happened that this chance entrance of Jacob Susanson was destined to influence the whole career of the master of the Red House.

The mere sight of the man suggested an idea to Jordison. The suggestion came at a critical moment. At first he thrust it from his mind as wild and impracticable. But by degrees it forced itself upon him and became a concrete fact. And that night he dreamed of illimitable wealth, and saw a stream of gold and jewels pour down from heaven like a Jacob's ladder, glittering with every hue of the rainbow.

CHAPTER XII

THE DOWNWARD STEP

One misty night in November, a broad fan of white light moved swiftly and silently southward along the old Roman road. Behind it lay the long dark body of an enormous motor-car. Its speed was terrific, but more noticeable than the speed, from a motorist's point of view, was the almost ghostly silence with which it tore along the straight road. There was no throb nor beat of machinery; no jar, nor rattle, nor vibration in any part. A low hiss of the wheels as they whizzed over the damp surface of the ground was the only sound that broke the stillness of the night. It was no more, proportionately, than the noise a bicycle might have made.

The ten miles between the Red House and the plantation at the foot of Heatherstone Park was covered in twelve minutes, and the machine was only run on its second speed. When it reached the place where Arthur Holme had pulled Lord Harry Quay out of the water it slowed down and came to a stop under the shadow of the trees which overhung the road. The three men alighted quickly. One of them turned out all the lights but the little lamp which hung behind. This he unhooked and let its rays fall on the motionless mass of metal.

"She's a beauty, Lipp," he said in a low voice, punching one of the back tires with his clenched fist. "There's not a car like her in England."

Lipp grunted doubtfully. He was not a judge of the beautiful, and certainly there was little to admire in the car from an æsthetic point of view. It was made entirely of steel, and bore some resemblance to the engine of an armoured train. It had a nine-foot wheel-base, and was eighteen feet in length. As it lay at rest it looked a huge unwieldy monster, an inert mass of metal, that four horses would have found a good load for them to draw. It weighed no less than three tons. It was painted black—bonnet, body, wheels, all a dead dull black, without any lustre of enamel to relieve the gloom of its surface. It was in truth an ugly thing, a cross between a hearse and a locomotive. Yet it represented the last word in motors. It was William Jordison's triumph—the almost perfect car.

He looked at it lovingly for a minute or two, touching the bearings here and there to see if they had become hot, and laying his hand tenderly on its long and hideous frame.

"Come along," growled Lipp roughly, "this ain't no beauty show. If we're out on business——"

"Have you all we want?" Jordison broke in quietly, turning the light on the man's face.

"Aye, aye," the man growled impatiently, "unless I've left my card-case on the 'all table."

"Well, keep close to me. I wish it were not so infernally dark, but it will be all in our favour later on. Jermy,

you stay by the car and keep your eyes and ears open. If any one comes along, pretend to be tinkering with the machinery. If you hear a shot or cries of pursuit, or anything that sounds as if we had been discovered, start the engines. It's just possible we may be in a hurry to get off."

With these parting instructions he climbed over the wall, and the two men crept through the narrow belt of trees. The wet bracken, breast-high in places, swished softly as they moved through its tangled fronds. A small animal of some kind rushed away from beneath their feet. Just as they emerged into the open a brace of pheasants rose with a whirr from the branches above.

"Curse the birds," muttered Jordison, "we'll have a keeper on us before we have done, and there'll be another 'serious poaching affray in Essex.'"

However, up to a certain point fortune was with them that night. They crossed the undulating park without attracting the attention of the two under-keepers whose duty it was to patrol the estate after sunset, and reached the garden, where they breathed in comparative safety.

The outline of the house was invisible against the dark sky, but a long line of windows on the ground floor glowed with yellow light. The upper part of the great pile of buildings was in total darkness. They paused under the branches of a gigantic tulip-tree and consulted in whispers. Lipp had already obtained a considerable knowledge of the house by means of a love-affair with one of the under-housemaids. Jordison had visited it more than once on show days, and a substantial tip to

the major domo had procured him the information he required.

Jordison looked at his watch; it was nine o'clock, an hour when the bedrooms of a house offer the most inducement to those who wish to enter them unobserved.

From where they stood they could see the windows of Lady Heatherstone's apartments; they were over the white drawing-room, which was now a blaze of light. Lipp knew where to lay hands on a ladder, but it seemed almost madness to place it against that part of the house. On the other hand, if an entrance were effected in another part, the risk of walking along the corridors would be considerable. Lipp was for the latter course, but Jordison preferred to take the bull by the horns and go straight for Lady Heatherstone's bedroom. The whole matter had been threshed out before they started, but the sight of the well-lighted windows reopened the question.

Suddenly a soprano voice began to sing, and the sweet melody of Lassen's "All Souls' Day" came to the watchers on the lawn. The notes brought no message of love or tenderness to their ears. But the same idea struck both of them.

"Now's the time," said Jordison; "where's the ladder?"

In less than five minutes Lipp fetched it and placed it against the wall. The song had ceased, and a piano-forte solo was filling the drawing-room with a loud crash of music.

"Nothing could be better," said Jordison; "you will

stay here, Lipp, and whistle if there is danger. It won't take more than five minutes, if I can get them at all."

Jordison ran swiftly up the ladder, opened the catch of the window with a penknife and softly raised the sash. Then he thrust his head round the corner of the silk blind and listened. The bedroom door was open, and he could see into the well-lighted corridor beyond.

The upper part of the house was perfectly quiet. He could hear neither footsteps nor voices. But from the drawing-room below there still came the low deep chords of Rachmaninoff's "Prelude." He crept quietly into the room, and, closing the door, locked it. Then he went to another door, opening into the next room. It was closed and he turned the key in the lock. Then he drew the heavy curtain across the window and taking a small but powerful electric lamp from his pocket, threw its rays on the walls and floor. His eye caught the faint sparkle of jewels on the dressing-table. He went eagerly across to it and gathered up everything of value that he could see—a magnificent diamond brooch, three or four rings set with rubies and emeralds, a jewelled purse of gold network with ten pounds in it, the hair-brushes, scent-bottles, and all the fittings of a lady's dressing-case, every one of solid gold, bearing an "H" and an earl's coronet in diamonds. All these he thrust into a small canvas bag he had brought with him, and his eyes glittered with excitement.

His task seemed no longer a sordid one. As he had crept into the room he had felt himself on a level with the meanest thief that was ever put in the dock of the Old

Bailey. It was his first essay in burglary, and the humiliation of the fact had pierced even his hardened conscience. But now, with the glitter of these gems before his eyes, he saw the possibilities of it all—the excitement, the risk, and the reward. Surely here was a sport at least equal to the shooting of big game, where a man carries his life in his hands, and where his safety depends on the quickness of his eye and the knowledge of his craft. For the first time he understood what the fascination of a highwayman's life must have been, and why so many gentlemen of birth and breeding had risked their necks in pursuit of what had hitherto appeared to be a mean and sordid occupation. Now he realised that in every sense of the word it was a sport, where the sportsman pitted his own wits and courage against those of his adversary.

And Jordison was hunting for bigger game to-night than the few knicknacks a lady leaves on her dressing-table. The Heatherstone jewels were famous, well known, and much paragraphed in papers which cater for the envious eyes of humble folk. A single pearl necklace was valued at forty-five thousand pounds. There was a diamond and emerald tiara which had once graced the head of an empress. Jordison knew well the insolent carelessness of rich people in these matters, but it was too much to hope that such treasures as these would be left to the mercy of a chance burglar. Lady Heatherstone had not left her room for two years, and during that period the jewels had not been seen in public. Jordison had ascertained, however, that she would

not allow them to be placed in a bank, but kept them in her own apartments, where she could personally inspect them from time to time.

He crept softly and quickly round the room, breaking open every drawer and box in the hope of finding something. He picked up a few trifles here and there. But it was clear that the most valuable jewels were carefully concealed. He did his work clumsily, for the sole knowledge of his art had been gleaned from a few conversations with Susanson, and half a dozen practical lessons on the locks of his own house. He was, however, perfectly equipped for the task, and he marvelled at the ease with which the slender steel jimmy tore away iron plates and locks.

It was not till he started an examination of the walls that he found the probable hiding-place of the jewels. Behind the curtains of the great fourposter bed he found the square outline of a small door. It was flush with the surface, covered with the same paper, and so exactly fitted into the wall round it that a casual observer might easily have passed it by. Jordison tapped it gently with his jimmy. It gave back a metallic ring. He passed his hands along the edge and encountered a keyhole a few inches below the framework of the bed. Then he placed his jimmy in the narrow crack and exerted all his strength to burst open the lock. He might as well have tried to move the foundations of St. Paul's Cathedral. The door did not move outward the hundredth part of an inch. The jimmy, wrought of perfect steel, curved like a spring.

Then suddenly he sprang back from the bed and listened. A low whistle came up from beneath the window. He walked over to it and, drawing back the blind and curtain, leaned out over the edge. He could not see Lipp, but a thin shaft of light from one of the drawing-room windows fell on the slender form of a young man walking across the lawn. He was smoking a large cigar, and as he came closer Jordison could see that he was a mere boy. But the light was too feeble to distinguish his face.

As ill-luck would have it, he came straight toward the ladder. He did not, however, notice it until he was four yards from the wall of the house. Then he stopped and glanced at it with idle curiosity. Apparently it conveyed nothing extraordinary to his mind; the mere carelessness of a gardener who had been training the ivy and creepers on the wall. But, just as he turned to recross the lawn, his eye caught the open bedroom window. Jordison, from behind the curtains, could see the boy's face looking upward. The light streaming through a chink between the blinds and the sash, showed, first a look of inquiry, then surprise, and then the triumphant expression of one who had made a great discovery. Jordison instinctively felt that he was trapped and began to wonder how fast he could run. Somehow he fancied that this stripling could give him about twenty yards in every hundred.

But another and a more practised eye had watched the boy's face from the shadow of the wall, where Lipp lay huddled close into the thick ivy. Before the youth

could either move or speak, something sprang out of the darkness and gripped him by the throat. Jordison could see the slender figure borne backward, and pressed quietly but with brutal strength onto the soft turf. There was no cry nor sound, only the writhing and twining of limbs. From the drawing-room window came the clear notes of a girl's voice, singing Tosti's "Good-by." Jordison felt that it was time to interfere. He slipped out of the window and, sliding down the ladder to the ground, went swiftly to the dark mass upon the lawn. By the time he reached it nothing moved. In the dim light he could see Lipp's hand still gripping something on the ground. But nothing moved.

"Hands off, Lipp," he whispered sternly.

The man did not move. Jordison whipped out his revolver and placed it to the fellow's ear.

"Hands off, I say, Lipp," he repeated; "you will kill the boy."

Lipp knew well that no sane person would fire and bring the whole household out on to the lawn. But he had already come to regard his master as on the border line of insanity, and he was taking no risks. He loosed his hold and rose to his feet. The boy's body lay limp and still on the lawn.

"Don't want another term, do yer?" growled the man in a whisper. "I've saved yer that. D'yer think yer wouldn't get caught between 'ere and the wall, if 'e cried out? Let's off. Gimme the swag."

Jordison handed him the canvas bag without a word, and Lipp began to run across the lawn, but his master

bent down over the prostrate form and for one brief second flashed the electric light into the boy's face. It was a hard, dissolute face for one so young, and looked horrible with the diffused blood which Lipp's powerful fingers had crushed into it. A great fear seized Jordison, and he placed his hand over the boy's heart. It had ceased to beat. Again he turned the light on the face, and looked long and keenly at the features. But strange to say, the thought uppermost in his mind was not that the boy was dead, but that he had seen his face before.

He rose rapidly to his feet and tore through the darkness, blundering through shrubs and flower-beds and trees till he reached the park wall. In less than ten minutes the motor was half way along the road to the Red House.

And all that night Jordison lay awake, and the face of the dead boy glowered at him through the darkness, and all that night Jordison puzzled his brain to remember where he had seen the face before.

CHAPTER XIII

NEWS FROM VALPARAISO

The next morning the whole of Essex rang with the news of the burglary at Heatherstone Hall, and the murder of young Lord Overcliffe, heir to the title and the great Heatherstone estates. By noon the story had reached the London evening papers, and the half-penny press worked up three columns out of the scanty material at their disposal. Fictitious anecdotes of the family from the time of Henry VIII supplied much of the matter. The news of the murder was brief, and was ingeniously sandwiched between the masses of irrelevant information. But that day saw a score of keen reporters on the spot, and half a dozen detectives, equally keen, but less obtrusive in their methods, and the following morning all England knew of the Heatherstone murder.

The news came to the Red House through the postman. Lipp brought it with the letters to William Jordison, as the latter was at breakfast. He conveyed the news in two words.

"Lord Overcliffe," he whispered quietly in his master's ear.

Jordison did not look up from his substantial breakfast of eggs and bacon, but taking up the letters which had been placed by his side, glanced carelessly at the

envelopes. Lipp still stood behind his chair, as though expecting some remark.

Jordison went on with his breakfast after selecting one letter from the others, and placing it by the side of his plate.

"Lord Overcliffe," Lipp repeated hoarsely. Jordison turned round sharply and looked at him. The man's face was white and unwholesome in appearance. There was a sullen look of fear in his eyes.

"It doesn't matter, Lipp," Jordison said, "the fact remains the same. It is an ugly business."

"We'll both swing for it," continued the servant in a half-frightened tone.

"Possibly," said Jordison, "but all men's lives are equal. Lord Overcliffe is of no more importance in the eyes of the law than one of the footmen."

The man bent down till his ugly mouth was within an inch of Jordison's ear.

"Yer a bloomin' fool," he said familiarly. "The death of a servant would be forgotten in a month. But 'im, that young 'ord—Lor' bless yer, they'll move heaven and earth an' 'ell to find out who killed 'im. And they've the brass to keep things a-rolling, and we 'aven't a dog's chance."

"I will take such chance as there is, Lipp," Jordison replied quietly, "and stay here. You can go if you like. But your departure will be known, and you will be followed and arrested on suspicion. Your past career will probably come to light, and then——"

"And then wot?"

"Why, the fat will be in the fire, and you will frizzle in it."

The man swore a horrible oath and gripped the back of Jordison's chair with his fingers. The latter did not look round at him, but his right hand stole to his pocket, as though searching for his handkerchief.

"Take my word for it, Lipp," he said quietly. "You are safe enough here."

"Wot of Jermy and Susanson?" said the man. "There'll be a thousand pound reward for this job, may be five thousand pound, may be ten thousand pound. 'Ole 'Etherstone won't spare expense. D'yer think 'uman natur' 'll stand it?"

Jordison made no reply. But the thought ran through his mind that he himself was equally dangerous to Lipp. He kept his hand in his pocket.

"D'yer think I'm goin' to put my neck in their dirty 'ands, or yours either?" continued the ruffian, echoing Jordison's own thoughts. "I ain't such a babe and suckling."

Jordison turned sharply round and caught the look in his servant's eyes—a murderous, evil look. He also saw a pair of thick muscular hands unpleasantly near the back of his neck. The man drew back, as he turned, and showed his yellow teeth.

"That'll do, Lipp," Jordison said; "I'll see that Jermy and Susanson keep their mouths shut. As for me, I'm in the same boat as yourself. Now, will you kindly go, as I want to read my letters and finish my breakfast, and, mark you, Lipp, no tricks. You'll find

me an unpleasant person to deal with if you cut up rough. But if you stick to me I'll stick to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, guvnor," the man replied; "but gi' me your solemn oath."

Jordison rose to his feet and held out his hand.

"Here's my hand on it, Lipp, and my word of honour."

The man took the proffered hand and peered into Jordison's face. Then he grinned and the master knew what was passing through the servant's mind, and his face flushed. "Word of honour!" The phrase had come to his lips from the past, when it had had a real meaning. He felt that it required some readjustment to suit the present circumstances.

"There's honour among thieves," he said bitterly; "you can trust me, Lipp."

"Swelp me bob, I believes yer, guvnor. I'll stick to yer."

"Neither Jermy nor Susanson must leave the house until I've decided how to keep their mouths shut. I can rely on you to see to that."

"Right, guvnor," the man answered, as he slouched out of the room.

When the door closed, Jordison hastily swallowed a few more mouthfuls of breakfast, but his eyes never left the letter which lay on the right of his plate, and every now and then he fingered it expectantly. The envelope was thick to the touch, and bore a monogram of B and W, intertwined so gracefully as to be barely intelligible.

When he had finished his breakfast he tore open the envelope, and, pulling out several sheets of paper, studied them carefully.

The letter from Messrs. Briggs & Warlock ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR: In accordance with your instructions we sent out our special agent to Valparaiso to investigate the supposed death of your son. We enclose you his report, from which we regret to learn that Mr. Richard Behag is undoubtedly dead, and was in all probability murdered by his friend, Mr. Arthur Sterious. Perhaps you will wish to let the matter end at this point. If you desire to trace the murderer of your son our services are at your disposal. We have so far not gone beyond your instructions. We are, dear sir,

"Yours respectfully,

"BRIGGS & WARLOCK."

Enclosed was the following report, written on foreign paper in a neat but commonplace hand:

"DEAR MR. WARLOCK:

"I sailed for Buenos Ayres on August 9th, in the *Caballo*, and, crossing overland to Valparaiso, put up at the *Viajero* Hotel. Within a few hours of my arrival I called on the chief of police and asked for his co-operation in the matter which had been placed in my hands. He treated me with coolness, but when I carelessly pulled out my wallet on pretence of searching for a letter,

and thereby disclosed a considerable bundle of English banknotes, his manner underwent a marked change, and at the end of half an hour we became the best of friends. This was a considerable but a necessary expense, and I did it as cheaply as possible. Senor Donoso is a very proud man. He promised to search up the records of his office. I gathered this would take time, as life is held cheap in these South American states, and the records of sudden death are somewhat voluminous. A week afterward I received a note from him asking me to call at his private house, and there, with the help of some excellent wine and cigars, he told me all that he knew about Richard Behag.

“It appears that when Behag left his ship at Valparaiso he obtained work as a clerk in the trading-house of Hicks, Sterious & Company, who were one of the leading English firms in the city. He seems to have been a young man of considerable intelligence and more than average education, for by the end of the year I find that he had been promoted to the responsible position of head cashier. It also seems that he had formed a somewhat undesirable friendship with young Arthur Sterious. The latter was the eldest son of the principal partner in the firm, but he had little or no aptitude for business, and his name was mixed up with more than one disreputable scandal in Valparaiso. From all that I could gather he appears to have been a young man of athletic build and pursuits, but of a peculiarly wild and vicious character. I strongly suspect that this somewhat undesirable friendship sprang from interested sources on

both sides. Behag saw a possible rise in his position from his intimacy with the son of a member of the firm, and Sterious, as I should guess from what subsequently transpired, had even more sordid reasons for a friendship with the cashier of his father's office. I may do either or both of them an injustice, but except on one point, their tastes appear to have been very dissimilar, and it is at any rate curious that a steady, hard-working young fellow like Behag should have chummed up with a man whose character was not even up to the somewhat lax standard of South American cities. They had, however, one pursuit in common, and it may possibly have been this which linked them together. They were both fond of the sea. Arthur Sterious owned two yachts, one the *Pajarito*, a small five-tonner, and the other the *Pajaro*, a fifty-tonner. Behag had been a sailor by profession, and was probably glad to be a passenger on the bigger boat, or else potter about in the smaller one for his own amusement. At any rate he seems to have spent much of his spare time on the water.

"Then one Sunday morning Behag and Sterious went out in the *Pajarito*, and since that day no one has ever set eyes on them again.

"It was a fine warm day with a slight southerly breeze. Both were experienced sailors, and it is extremely unlikely that they could have come to grief in fair weather. But for all that the *Pajarito* was never picked up. A week afterward her dinghey came ashore twenty miles north of Valparaiso, bottom upward.

"The general opinion at the time was that for some

reason or other the yacht had foundered, and that the two men had put off in the dinghey and met with an accident in the open sea.

“But three months afterward it was rumoured that the great firm of Hicks, Sterious & Company were in difficulties. A month later they failed, and in the subsequent inquiries into the matter it came out that they had been robbed of cash and negotiable securities to the enormous amount of two hundred thousand pounds, and that the fraud had been discovered twenty-four hours after the disappearance of the head cashier.”

Jordison rose to his feet with darkened face, half crumpling the letter in his hand. He scarcely dared to read another line. His mind flew back to the miserable termination of his own honesty. Was it possible that history had repeated itself, that the son was tainted with the father's blood, that the criminal instinct had become hereditary? If it were so, he thanked God that his son was dead, and that the race had been stamped out.

He sat down again in the chair and buried his face in his hands, and several moments elapsed before he had the courage to resume the perusal of the letter. It continued as follows:

“The firm had kept the secret till they were forced to disclose it, knowing well that any rumour of their loss would involve them in ruin. But directly the truth was known, it was clear to every one that the robbery had been committed by Behag and Sterious, and that the two men had endeavoured to make off with all the negotiable securities on the *Pajarito*.

"At first it seemed probable that the two men had rowed ashore in the dinghey and made good their escape, but a month after the failure of Hicks, Sterious & Company, the sea gave up its dead. The body of a man was washed ashore forty miles north of Valparaiso, and though scarcely a shred of flesh was left on the bones, and the clothes were so worn as to scarcely afford the means of identification, yet there was no doubt that it was the body of Richard Behag, for a gold ring bearing his monogram was still hanging on one of his fingers. The skull was broken in, and the doctor who examined the body gave it as his opinion that this was the result of foul play. The mark was long and clearly defined, as though it had been inflicted by some heavy instrument, and it was clearly not caused by rocks or an accidental collision of the body with anything in the sea.

"This discovery put an entirely new complexion on affairs, and the police came to the reasonable conclusion that Sterious had murdered Behag and made good his escape with the lost securities.

"This theory was subsequently confirmed by a most unexpected occurrence. One morning about six months after the day Sterious and Behag had left Valparaiso, Mr. Sterious, senior, received a bulky package from England. It was registered and addressed in a handwriting that he did not recognise. On opening it he found that it contained the whole of the missing securities, and that only the sum of two thousand pounds was missing. The surprise was as welcome as it was inexplicable. But Hicks, Sterious & Company have

regained nearly all the prestige they had lost, and they are to-day one of the most respected firms in Valparaiso. I may say that the package was posted in the southwest district of London.

“For obvious reasons the firm made no endeavours to trace the whereabouts of Arthur Sterious, and the police here have their hands too full of murder cases to take any trouble in the case of a young man who had no friends to stimulate their efforts with hard cash. The matter has been entirely dropped. Richard Behag is dead and Arthur Sterious has disappeared, and there the whole story seems to end. A careful perusal of the evidence that I send you has led me to the following simple conclusion:

“Behag and Sterious arranged to rob the bank and escape on the *Pajarito*. They subsequently quarrelled, as thieves will do, over the division of the spoil. Or, perhaps Sterious, who seems to have been a thorough scoundrel, thought it would be best to put his accomplice out of the way. At any rate, Arthur Sterious killed Behag, threw him overboard, and tried to sail the yacht himself. He probably found this too much for him, got into difficulties, scuttled the boat and made off for shore in the dinghey, which he subsequently left to the mercy of the waves and winds. Eventually he managed to make his way to Europe. Up to this point the theory seems to present no difficulties, but the return of the securities is absolutely inexplicable, and I have, as yet, been unable to conceive why a man who had risked so much to gain this end, and who had even killed his

accomplice in the course of his crime, should give back the very thing for which he had committed both robbery and murder.

"I may say in conclusion that I have made strenuous efforts to secure a photograph of Arthur Sterious, and have even committed a mild burglary with this object in view. The young man has apparently only been photographed once during the past seven years, and I have been unable to lay my hands on a single copy. As, however, my instructions do not extend beyond the confirmation of Mr. Behag's death, I dare say your client will be satisfied with what I have accomplished.

"Unless I receive a cable from you within two months from date, I shall return home. In the mean time I will endeavour to obtain such information about Mr. Sterious as may lead to his ultimate capture. The case interests me, and if any one else is sufficiently interested in the detection of the murderer, and would pay my expenses and a trifle for myself, I will guarantee to track the fellow down. At present my only clue is the fact that the securities were posted from London, and that the fugitive is a man of great height and breadth of shoulder, with fair hair and grey eyes. As you may imagine, this description will fit a large number of men,

"I am, dear sir, your obedient servant,

"EDWARD LAMPET."

Jordison laid the letter down, and stared into the fire. It warmed his face with a red glow, yet the tinge of colour did not soften the hard cold misery in his eyes.

His son was dead; little Dickie, whom he only remembered as an innocent child, was dead—a thief murdered by his accomplice.

“It is well,” he murmured to himself; “it is well that he is dead.”

Yet that day he wired to Briggs & Warlock, and before evening the message had been flashed across the broad Atlantic to Edward Lampet. The cable was short, but expressed all that was uppermost in the man’s mind:

“Sterious must be found. Spare no expense.”

And all that night Jordison dreamed of a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow with fair hair and grey eyes—a bronzed young fellow versed in seacraft; and in one of the dreams the stalwart frame hung up limp from a rope, with strapped arms and a broken neck.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT JERMY FOUND IN THE CREEK

Lipp was right in his conjectures. Two weeks after the murder of young Lord Overcliffe a bill was posted throughout the length and breadth of the country, proclaiming that Lord Heatherstone would give five thousand pounds reward to any one who would give such information as would lead to the detection of the murderer. The keenest professional inquiry agents in England gathered to that part of the world as vultures to a carcass; the police moved on in their own silent, methodical way; and the number of men who left their legitimate business and assumed the rôle of amateur detective was so considerable that it amounted to a serious disorganisation of labour in the eastern counties. It seemed, however, as though the murderers had left no trace behind them. Lipp and Jordison feared only one danger, and that was within their own house.

It came home to them at last. One morning Lipp, half-dressed, saw a figure far down the road that led to Gorehaven. At first he thought it was the postman, then, noticing that it was moving away from the house, he rushed downstairs, and found that Susanson was missing. Half an hour later Jordison was driving his motor furiously along the road between the creeks, and Lipp

was sitting in the tonneau behind with a pair of field-glasses in his horny hands. Jermy, bound hand and foot, was lying on his back in a locked room and contemplating a patch of dull grey sky through a barred window. He felt it to be an indignity, but he realised the necessity of the precaution. Hour after hour he spluttered horrible oaths through the gag that had been fastened in his mouth, cursing Jordison, cursing Lipp, and cursing, most of all, Susanson, the dirty little Jew, who had forestalled him in his treachery. He pictured to himself Susanson squandering his five thousand pounds on diamond rings and fat little Jewesses with black, greasy locks.

But the sense of fury and disappointment in Jermy's mind soon gave way to an overwhelming terror. He knew that he had not many hours to live. He realised that his death would be a most desirable event in the eyes of Lipp and Jordison, and that neither of them was likely to have any scruples about taking his life.

If Susanson had reached the police station at Gorehaven, Lipp and Jordison would have all their work cut out to save themselves, and probably they would not even return to the house. If, on the other hand, they overtook Susanson, it was quite certain that the poor little Jew would never have another chance of betraying them. In which case Jermy would be the sole possessor of the secret, and it would be almost necessary for them to ensure his silence.

In either case Jermy realised that he must free himself from his bonds. He would either be left to starve

to death or else he would be murdered, or else he would himself fall into the hands of the police, an event which, though preferable to the other two alternatives, would be by no means a thing to be desired.

All through the day his mind had been trying to evolve some method of loosening his bonds, but he was as helpless as a man with a broken spine. Not only was he bound hand and foot, but several separate ropes had been passed round his body, till he was swathed like an Egyptian mummy. As an additional security a rope had been passed round his neck and fastened to the leg of a heavy iron bedstead. Lipp had done his work well. The prisoner could not even roll over on the floor. Jermy knew that he must free his hands, but it seemed almost an impossibility. The wrists were lashed tightly together, and his arms were bound close to his body. Even if he could have raised his wrist to his mouth he would have been no nearer to freedom, for the gag effectually prevented him from doing anything with his teeth.

All through the day he lay like a log, hungry, thirsty, half choked, and aching with the pressure of his bonds; and yet all the time forgetting physical discomfort and pain in the agony of terrible suspense, with ears strained to catch the sound of voices outside the window and the tramp of footsteps on the stairs.

It was not until the sunlight had died from the sky that a humble friend came to Jermy's assistance. Shortly after the clock in the hall had chimed five he heard the patter of tiny feet on the floor of his bedroom.

He knew at once that it was a rat. The house was literally overrun with them. His mind at once travelled back to stories he had read—thrilling stories, where a kindly rodent had nibbled through the bonds of the hero. He glanced at the ropes. They looked unappetising, and he remembered that the hero had generally managed to rub them over with oil or fat. However, he lay still and hoped, for it is wonderful what straws a drowning man will clutch at.

The rat moved round and round in search of something to eat. Once it came within a yard of Jermy's head, and looked at him with beady eyes. Perhaps it recognised a brother, for it was the animal of which Jermy was the human type—the unclean, ravenous thing that man stamps under foot and exterminates. Jermy held his breath and wondered what it would do next. He recalled unpleasant tales of men being eaten alive by rats, and the sound of others in the wainscoting by no means reassured him. The rat, however, did not seem to care for a closer acquaintance with the lump of silent flesh on the floor, and, turning round, it ran up the bedclothes, and made its way up a bell-rope to a long deal shelf, some eight feet above the ground. The shelf was covered with tins, jars, and bottles, and Jermy heard the clink of glass as the animal crept along on its tour of inspection.

Then the rat did a thing which, if it had occurred in the Middle Ages, would have earned it a place of honour on the Jermy coat-of-arms. It discovered a large jar half full of axle-grease, and in its efforts to taste this rich

dainty it sent the whole thing crashing to the ground. The bottom half, with its jagged edge of thick earthenware, rolled to Jermy's side.

In less than a quarter of an hour Jermy had sawn through the rope that bound his wrists and arms. The broken edge of the jar was as keen as a razor. Rolling his body from side to side, he worked carefully and with enormous difficulty. His hands streamed with blood, but the loss of a finger would not have stopped him.

With hands and arms unbound the rest was easy. He cut through all the ropes in five minutes, and, rising to his feet, moved painfully across the room to a cupboard, where he found a bottle of brandy. A deep draught of the fiery liquid put fresh life into his aching limbs and body. He went hurriedly to a dirty old cigar-box full of papers and drew out a purse with twenty-five sovereigns in it. Then he glanced at the window and door, decided on the latter, and burst it open with the heavy iron fender.

Then he made his way downstairs, crammed half a loaf and a chunk of bacon into his pocket, and slipped out into the road.

There was no one in sight, but he could not see far in any direction. A white mist was rising from the marshes, and the road disappeared from view three hundred yards from the Red House. The sun had set, but the sky was clear, and not yet dark. The full moon showed large and yellow on the horizon through a bank of sea-fog. Jermy stood a moment at the gate and listened. The silence was complete and unbroken.

He wondered what lay beyond the wall of mist; whether Jordison and Lipp were tearing at full speed to the nearest seaport, or whether Susanson had been captured. The motor was so silent that it might flash upon him at any moment out of the mist. Any other machine would have given warning of its approach, and the low throb of the engines would have been heard two miles away. But this black monster moved like a ghost, and, till its lights flashed suddenly out of the darkness, no man could know how near it was to him.

Jermy had, however, to take his chance, and he set off along the road to Gorehaven. It was the only route open to him. In all directions he was cut off by winding creeks, full almost to the banks, for a spring tide was running up from the sea, and it was nearly high water.

On either side of the road lay two tall banks; beyond them were two strips of marsh-land, intersected by a thousand tiny channels and gullies. At low tide these were merely narrow ravines of mud, some more than six feet in depth, and some shallow little gutters, tapering off into a point, losing themselves in thick masses of purple sea-lavender. But on this night they were full to the brim with water.

Jermy decided that the open road was too perilous for his purpose, so he climbed a steep bank on the left and descended to the marsh-land on the other side of it. A rude pathway ran at the foot. In some places it was overgrown with glasswort, now turning to a mass of crimson spears; in others it was a narrow stretch of mud littered with corks, bottles, scraps of wood and sticks,

reeds, and a thousand and one pieces of débris that had drifted up the creek with the tide. The bank was over six feet high, and he was well screened from observation, but the walking was difficult, and he moved slowly on his journey. Every now and then he crawled cautiously to the top of the bank, and, peering over the edge, looked up and down the road.

A faint wind had risen from the southwest, and the mist was gradually being scattered before it. In half an hour's time he could see nearly a mile in every direction. At the end of an hour he had travelled little more than three miles, but his limbs were still stiff from the ropes that had cut into his flesh and muscles, and he was beginning to be tired of his journey. He lay down on the bank to rest, so that his eyes could scan the long road beyond. The bank was wet with a heavy dew and so steep that he stood almost upright as he leaned against it. But it afforded a certain degree of comfort after his weary tramp on the slippery and overgrown path. He pulled out the bread and bacon and ate heartily; then he filled a short clay pipe with black shag and smoked till a sense of peace crept over him, and he saw himself the owner of five thousand pounds. He had no doubt that the stupid little Susanson was dead.

His happy meditations were interrupted by a yellow glow in the mist, where the road vanished from sight. A few seconds later three bright sparks glittered in the distance like stars, and every second they increased in size, till he could see the black car behind them. In less than a minute they had flashed past him, and the fan of

light receded farther and farther till it died away in the mist beyond.

He sprang to his feet and continued his journey. He had noted that there were only two people in the car. It was quite evident that Susanson had been effectually disposed of, for it was hardly likely that the two men would have returned to the Red House if the little Jew had made good his escape. The reward was in Jermy's hands if he could only get off the marshland into the open country.

At present he was so bound up among the creeks and inlets on either side of the road that he could only escape by hiding. He knew well enough that before long the motor would come tearing back along the road, and that the occupants would organise a systematic search on either side of it.

He had nearly three miles to go before he could take to the fields and strike across country to Gorehaven. He had a few miles' start, but this, even with the time that they would occupy in discovering his absence, was not much for a man in a race with a motor that could run one hundred miles in the hour.

The wind had cleared away the last remnant of the fog, and the full moon shone clear over the country. The marsh-land was richly veined with silver where the light fell on the thousand creeks and gullies. It was a singularly beautiful sight, but Jermy cursed it with a foul mouth. He would have liked a fog so dense that a man could not see his own feet. In ten minutes' time he peeped over the edge of the bank, and again

saw three bright eyes in the distance and a blotch of black on the long white road. He hastened on his way, bending down a little in case they should catch some glimpse of him from the passing car.

When at last he heard the swish of mud, he lay flat on the ground among some tall marsh weeds. The car passed and he rose to his feet. He knew well enough the method of his pursuers. They would go to the end of the marshes where the road joined the old Roman causeway, and then they would beat backward on foot, one on either side of the road. In the bright moonlight it would scarcely be possible for him to escape their notice. A pair of night-glasses would detect a moving figure on that flat surface for miles around. He stopped and hesitated, whether to go forward or return. If he proceeded on his way he would be bound to meet them. If he went back he would perhaps escape them for the moment, but he was only running farther into a trap and farther from safety. If he had been armed he would have stood his ground with confidence. But Jordison took good care that there should be only one revolver at the Red House.

He finally decided to go back. He crept as near to the bank as he could, and in a few minutes crossed it and kept close to it on the other side. If his estimate of his pursuers was correct, he would be hidden from their view.

For a quarter of an hour he trudged homeward. Every now and then he turned back and saw the distant twinkle of the Bleriot lamps, motionless at the far end

of the road. Then, as he looked, they seemed larger, and a minute later he realised that the motor was moving rapidly toward him. He saw now what had happened. He was discovered.

He crawled over the edge of the bank again, and leaned against it, sweating at every pore. Once, twice, three times he saw a figure stand on the edge of the bank, and each time nearer to him. They were reconnoitring as they proceeded along the road. When the figures had disappeared for the third time he turned swiftly aside toward the creek, and looked sharply round for some place of concealment. The water was flush with the edge, and the banks afforded no shelter. He was unable to swim and dared not risk the crossing.

Then a few yards away he saw that one of the little gullies narrowed up till it almost disappeared under the tall weeds on either side. He did not hesitate for a moment, but flung himself into it. From its narrowness he had estimated its depth at about two feet, but to his surprise he sank down and down until his head was under water and he felt the soft mud-banks press into his shoulders. With a stupendous effort he dug his feet and hands into the mud and raised himself up to the surface, spluttering and gasping for breath. One of his hands had caught something hard, and he brought it up with him. As he held it above the water in the moonlight he saw that it was a gold watch and chain. He thrust it into his pocket. It represented an additional item in his small exchequer. He found he could

just touch the bottom with his feet, and his head was concealed by a bunch of weeds overhead. As he felt himself sinking into the mud, he moved up a little toward the road in the hope of finding a better footing. His feet encountered something firm but elastic, like a pillow stuffed with straw. He put one toe under it and gave it a lift.

And then a horrible thing happened. He felt the object rise from the bed of the gully, and a few seconds later a white face rose from the water. He moved aside the weeds and let the moon fall on it. It was ghastly, distorted and streaming with black mud. A small crab was hanging to one of the ears. It was the face of Susanson.

Jermy forgot all caution in his terror and shrieked aloud. And looking up at that moment he saw two figures on the bank against the sky. He knew he was discovered, for they had descended and came hurriedly toward him. He struggled out of the gully and was on his feet to meet them before they reached the spot. He was a powerful man, and had no intention of dying like a rat in a sewer. As he rose from the water the white face of Susanson sank slowly back into its muddy resting-place.

The two men came to within five feet of him, and he saw that Jordison held a revolver in his hand. They stopped.

"What are you doing here, Jermy?" Jordison asked in a quiet voice.

The man did not answer, but braced every muscle in

his body. He had an idea that Jordison would not fire, and that it would come to a physical combat.

"Well?" Jordison repeated.

"Yer bloomin' skunk!" Lipp growled, "yer thought yer'd got the five thousand pounds, eh?" and he laughed horribly.

Jordison raised his revolver, but Lipp laid a hand on his arm and muttered in his ear. The next second they were upon their victim, and the three rolled over on the spongy ground. The contest was short but decisive. Jermy drove his fists into Lipp's face with such force that half of the latter's front teeth went down his throat, and the next second he had bitten a piece out of Jordison's ear. But he was overpowered, and Lipp began to choke the life out of him, while Jordison held down his legs and arms. With a stupendous effort he freed one of his hands, and thrust it into his pocket. He had a confused idea that there was a weapon there.

Quick as thought Jordison gripped his wrist, and as he inserted his hand into the pocket, the fingers touched the gold watch. He drew it out. Now, Jordison knew that Jermy had no gold watch, and he gave a quick glance of curiosity at it, before flinging it aside. In that brief moment he caught sight of a name engraved on the back of the case, and for the time being he forgot everything else. He loosed Jermy, and slipping the watch into his pocket, sprang to his feet.

"Let the man go, Lipp," he cried. "I want to speak to him. I can shoot him if he runs."

Lipp loosed the throat, but stood over the fellow like

a cat watching a mouse. Jermy did not move. He was nearly black in the face, and struggling to get his breath.

"Where did you get this watch?" asked Jordison. A faint hope flickered in Jermy's breast. He noted the look on his master's face as he asked the question. Here was something that was required of him, and he knew that no answer could be got out of a dead man. He regained his wits—the wits of a professional scoundrel.

"I'll tell yer if ye'll take me 'ome," he replied, gasping for breath, "and swear yot ~~can~~ try this game again."

"If you'll swear you won't peach on us, and tell me what I want," Jordison replied, "I'll give you my word of honour as a gentleman that we will not harm you."

Jermy swore the oath in picturesque language, and Jordison gave him the required assurance. Then Jordison and Lipp grasped the man by the arms and led him to the motor-car. In a few minutes they were in the Red House.

Then over a substantial supper Jermy told his comrades how he had found the gold watch, but he said nothing of the body in the mud. Jordison's face fell, and there was an ugly look on it, but he remembered his promise. He felt that he had been tricked, for the news was quite valueless.

Yet that night in his bedroom he turned the watch over and over in his hand, looking at it as though he expected it to speak to him. But it only spoke the five words engraved on the back of it:

"Arthur Sterious, from his mother."

CHAPTER XV

LOVE'S BITTERNESS

Arthur Holme was dining at Heatherstone Hall the night that young Lord Overcliffe was killed. This fact, unimportant in itself, formed a close bond between him and the grief-stricken family. It was he who carried the dead boy from the garden to the smoking-room. He saw Lady Agnes turn white as death, stagger, and fall in a heap to the ground. He heard the shrieks of the distracted mother crying out for vengeance on the murderers of her only son. He accompanied Lord Heatherstone in the midnight hunt, and through all the vain hue and cry of that wild night he and Lord Harry Quy supported the old man in his hour of sorrow.

To be with people in an hour like this counts for many days of ordinary intercourse, and so it came to pass that Arthur Holme became very intimate with the Heatherstone folk, and found his way into the heart of at least one person in the family.

Before a month had elapsed from the death of Overcliffe, Arthur Holme found himself fighting against the dictates of his own heart. His whole nature cried out for love, and he knew that Lady Agnes loved him. No word of it had passed between them, no look betrayed it,

and the clasp of the hand, when they met and parted, gave no sign of it. But some subtle and undefined instinct told each of them the truth. If anything, the knowledge made them over-careful and over-reserved in each other's company. A stranger seeing them together would have said that the relations between them were strained, and that only common courtesy obliged them to have anything to do with each other.

Arthur Holme fought a terrible battle with himself, but he conquered. He was a strong man, and in his rough way an honourable man. He knew that Lady Agnes loved him, and he knew that she would probably be as wax in his hands and that nothing would keep her from him if he chose to storm the stronghold of her own family pride and her father's displeasure. But he knew also that to marry her would be to drag her from her high estate. And he knew also that he would take her from Lord Harry Quy, a man who was not only his friend, but who would be a more suitable husband in every way for this sensitive high-born girl. It has been said that love conquers all. But though a strong man cannot conquer love, he can put it down till it only cries out faintly from his own soul. He can bind it and stifle it and stamp on it, till its existence is as unknown to the outer world as that of one of the prisoners in the old dungeons of Venice.

Arthur Holme resolved to deal with his heart in his own way. He knew the limitations of human nature, and decided to break off all communication with the

people at Heatherstone Hall. His only home was in the fifteen-ton boat that lay in the Essex creeks. He had no ties. There was no question of changing house or shifting furniture. He had but to set sail, and move into another part of the country. Save for Lady Agnes, he did not care a straw for the ultra-civilisation of Heatherstone Hall. His friend, Lord Harry Quy, was up in town contributing a solid vote and golden silence to the Conservative cause. Dress clothes and a footman at his elbow did not appeal to Arthur Holme. He was only really happy when he was hanging onto the tiller with his feet pressed against the bulwarks, and the frothy water was sweeping past him like a mill-race. To break off all connection with the Heatherstones would only mean the loss of Lady Agnes. And that would be all for her good. And so the young man resolved to fly from temptation. It was no act of weakness, for a man must be superhuman to be long with the woman he loves and be silent. It was rather, from a man's point of view, an act of strength, a sacrifice for the good of the woman.

Yet it is pitiful to learn how small a thing will shatter all the resolutions of a brave man.

Arthur Holme sprung his news on the Heatherstone household at dinner one night. He longed, so he said, for a breath of the sea. He had work to do, work that Lord Heatherstone did not approve of, but still work that had to be done. His heart was with the toilers on the deep, and he had resolved to take the *Rover* to Yarmouth, and, if possible, adjust a dispute between the

smack-owners and the men which threatened the livelihood of thousands.

Lord Heatherstone received his news with genuine regret. The other guests murmured various common-places. One lady said that she had worked woollen comforters for the North Sea fishermen. Lady Agnes was silent, but a close observer might have noted the tremor of her hand as she lifted a glass of water to her lips. Arthur Holme did not dare to look at her face. He felt the cruelty of this sudden and public announcement. But he had resolved that there should be no farewell scene between them, and that the girl he loved should both receive the news of his departure in the presence of her family and be finally included in a formal leave-taking.

It was therefore the irony of fate that brought these two together after they had said good-bye in the presence of a dozen other people. A few minutes before midnight Arthur Holme and Lord Heatherstone sat alone in the smoking-room. The guests had departed, and Lord and Lady Gambridge, who were staying in the house, had gone to bed. The noble Earl was expounding his views on labour and capital, a subject introduced by Holme's projected visit to the scene of a great labour dispute. He quoted copiously from the speeches of men long dead, and from the works of authors who were deservedly forgotten. He was a man of accurate memory for unimportant details, and referred to fifty works that Holme had never heard of. In one case, however, his memory failed him. It was necessary to refer to the

book. Holme protested that he would accept the quotation without reference. But Lord Heatherstone would have none of this.

It would be better, he said, to refer to the book. He was not quite sure if he had the book, but he fancied it was in the library. If it was in the house, it was in section H, shelf 7.

Holme rose to his feet. "I will look for it, Lord Heatherstone," he said, perhaps a trifle wearily. It was getting late, and he did not care a rap for the authority in question. But he was anxious to humour a man from whom he had received much kindness and whom he might never see again.

As he made his way across the hall to the library he was surprised to see the door open, and noticed that there was a faint glow in the room, as though a single light had been switched on at the far end of it. It was an enormous apartment, nearly two hundred feet in length. The book-shelves covered the walls to the height of eight feet from the ground and ran out in wings to the centre of the room. He entered quietly and his footsteps made no sound on the thick pile carpet.

He knew that section H was half-way down the side opposite the door, and making his way round one of the projecting walls of books, he walked down the centre aisle. As he did so, he heard a faint sound at the far end of the room, the sound of a book being replaced in its shelf.

He walked rapidly past section H and then paused, for another sound came to his ears, the heartbreaking

sobs of a woman, low, stifled, but distinct in the silence. An expression of pain crossed his face, and he stood irresolute, trembling in every limb. He knew well who it was that wept. And then in a single moment his whole being went out to the woman he was deserting, the woman who loved him. Prudence, honour, the knowledge of what was best for both of them, were all swept to the four winds of heaven. His love and his pity rode triumphant over everything. And yet for a moment he paused. He had purposely avoided a farewell scene. Here it lay, ready made to his hand. He was a strong man, but he paused only for a few seconds. In that time he prayed that the sobbing might cease. But it did not cease, and the sound of it made him a poor, weak thing. He clenched his hands in despair, and strode rapidly to the end of the room.

He purposely made a noise before he came to the last wing of books, and when he passed it, Lady Agnes Cliffe was looking diligently at the shelves as though in search of something. She half turned toward him with a faint smile on her flushed face.

"Mr. Holme," she said in surprise, "whatever——"

"Your father sent me to find a book," he broke in hurriedly. "I wondered who had turned on the light, I——"

"Section H," she said with a laugh. "Father only favours that particular part of the library. It is his armory for political purposes. This is N—pure fiction. My stepmother is unwell and wants something to send her to sleep."

Holme did not answer, but coming close to her side glanced at the title of the book she held in her hand. It was Beatrice Harraden's "Ships That Pass in the Night." He wondered if this was a mere coincidence.

"'Ships That Pass in the Night,' " he said slowly, and then he laughed bitterly. She looked up at his face, and the next moment she was sobbing in his arms.

It was all very sudden and very unmaidenly, but the look on his face compelled it. For the moment her reason had left her, and she had acted as her heart commanded. But a second later she broke away from his clasp, and burying her face in her hands cried as though her heart would break. He came to her side again.

"Agnes," he said softly, "I implore you, dear Agnes—oh, what have I done? Don't cry, dearest, don't cry like that."

Again he took her in his arms, and this time she did not try to free herself from his embrace. But she looked up at him with pleading eyes. He bent down his face and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. His whole nature cried out for the touch of her lips, but he was man enough to subdue the passion that burned within him.

She looked into his face again, and he saw the glad light of love shine through the tears in her eyes. But still she did not speak.

"Agnes, dearest," he said in a low voice, "I have something to say to you, and I must say it quickly. I would have left without saying it, but it must be said now—after what has happened."

She turned her eyes away from his face, and he drew

her closer to him. He could feel her slim body tremble in his arms.

"Agnes," he said simply, "I love you. It sounds weak to say you are the only woman I have ever loved. It is a stock phrase; the ridicule of cynics; in most cases a lie, that no intelligent woman believes. But in my case it is the real truth. Yet to-night I must leave you, and never see you again. I will not drag you down to my level. But for a moment of weakness, but for the prank that chance has played us, I should have left without telling you this. Now that I have told it, I must go."

"Arthur," she murmured, but so faintly that the sound hardly came to his ears. It was the first word she had spoken, and all the love of her heart was concentrated in the softly breathed name. An appeal, a despairing cry, a prayer for him to stay—it was all these blended together by love in a single word.

"Yes, I must leave you, Agnes," he continued, "I am no fit husband for you. It is not only that you are a great lady, and I am a poor man. Were I but the son of a farmer on your father's estate I could look you honestly in the face and ask you to be my wife. But being what I am, I could not drag you down to my level. I see you for the last time, Agnes. I must go now."

"Yes, I think it is time that Mr. Arthur Holme went," said a stern, cold voice behind them.

They sprang apart and, turning round, confronted the Earl of Heatherstone. His heavy, handsome face was flushed with anger, but he controlled himself with the

skill of the trained diplomat. Lady Agnes hid her crimson face in her hands. Arthur Holme clenched his right fist.

"Mr. Arthur Holme is going, Lord Heatherstone," he said. "How long have you been here?"

He snapped the last half dozen words out so savagely that Lord Heatherstone shrank back a pace. But he recovered his composure in a moment.

"Agnes," he said quietly, "go up to your bedroom at once. Mr. Holme, I will have a word with you before you go."

Lady Agnes went up to her infuriated father and kissed him meekly on the cheek. "Good-night," she said in a low voice. He did not answer, but turned his back on her. She held out her hand timidly to Arthur Holme.

"Good-bye," she said in a whisper.

Holme looked at her father, and the devil rose in his heart. He stepped forward to clasp her in his arms and kiss her passionately on the lips. But his finer nature prevailed. He stopped suddenly and held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said hoarsely, "and God bless you."

She took his hand, looked for a moment into his eyes, and fled. He turned to the great Earl of Heatherstone.

"Well, my lord," he said sharply, "what have you to say for yourself?" It was characteristic of the man that he assumed the attitude of a judge at a time when his proper place was in the dock.

"It is for you to speak, Mr. Holme," Lord Heather-

stone replied; "but let us return to the smoking-room. It is cold in here."

The two men went back to the smoking-room. Lord Heatherstone flung himself in an easy-chair by the fire, Holme remained standing. For a while neither of them spoke.

"Well, sir," said Lord Heatherstone, after a pause.

"As you have been listening, my lord, I think you know everything. It is possibly clear to you that I love your daughter. It is equally clear, if you heard rightly, that I shall not see her again."

"You damned scoundrel!" cried Lord Heatherstone, rising to his feet, "what right have you to speak of love to my daughter? Who are you, you damned adventurer? Don't you know your place, confound you? Do you think that because we——"

"That'll do, Lord Heatherstone," the young man replied; "I know my place quite well. And it is because I know it that I have resolved never to enter this house again. I will wish you good-bye, my lord."

"Stay, Mr. Holme; you cannot go yet. How long has this been going on?"

"It commenced five minutes before you came into the room. It ended when your daughter left it. But I shall answer no more questions. I wish you good-night," and he turned to go.

Lord Heatherstone laughed.

"When I was your age," he said in an insolent tone, "I had more pluck. I would not have broken the heart of the woman I loved for all the social distinctions in the

world. Bah! I thought there was more fight in you. I do not think Agnes has lost much."

Arthur Holme turned sharply round, and his face paled for all the bronze that the sea and winds had given it.

"There's plenty of fight in me, Lord Heatherstone," he replied in a strained voice. "And if you rouse it, you will bring the devil into your household. I am man enough to retire without wrecking your home. Even if I thought that your own case had made you lenient to us both, even if I thought that your second marriage with a woman whom you dragged up from obscurity had made you less punctilious about the alliances of your house, I would not offer myself as a suitor for your daughter's hand."

"You have no money," said Lord Heatherstone. "It would, of course, be an impossible match. We do not even know who you are."

"I know this," Holme replied gravely, "that I am no fit husband for any woman. But, mark you, Lord Heatherstone, if you rouse the devil in me, I may cast all scruples to the winds. I am a strong man, and I care little for your lands and your titles. If I did resolve to follow my desires, Lord Heatherstone, I would, indeed, 'leave your house unto you desolate.' "

Lord Heatherstone sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. Arthur Holme had struck hard, and struck deep. It was but a month since Lord Overcliffe had died.

Holme was disgusted with the brutality of his own

words. He stepped over to Lord Heatherstone and laid one hand on his shoulder.

"I am sorry, Lord Heatherstone," he said quietly; "I did not mean to hurt you. You would forgive me much if you knew what this brief glimpse of love has been to me. Good-night and—good-bye."

CHAPTER XV^T

THE TRAP

Holme made his way through the garden and crossed the park to the creek, where the *Rover* lay at her anchorage. It was a frosty night, and a full moon shone brightly in a cloudless sky. A shimmer of silver lay on the grass, and the trees sparkled with the frozen dew. But his mind was not attuned to any beauties in the landscape. He knew that he had acted like a weak fool, and even the fact that he was leaving Heatherstone Hall behind him for ever did not atone for the brief outburst of passion which was bound to bring sorrow into more than one life. He knew that he would always look back to those five minutes of love as a fair spot to be remembered, as a shadow of a great tree in a thirsty land. Yet the sparkling well he had drunk from was not altogether sweet, and the memory of how his thirst had been quenched would always be vitiated by the bitter taste that the draught had left in his mouth. He reached the edge of the plantation, and, brushing through the wet undergrowth, sent showers of frost flakes from the bare branches of the trees. Then he climbed over the wall and saw the dark outline of his boat on the silvery strip of water.

He stood on the bank opposite to her and hailed the man on board. After half a dozen calls James Outen came to the deck of the cutter. He quickly unfastened the painter and sculled to the bank. Then he waded ashore through the mud and brought his master a heavy pair of seaman's boots. Holme put them over his dress trousers and made his way down the bank through a foot of slime. The tide was running out.

"Asleep, Outen?" he queried, as they pushed the boat off.

"I was just dozing, sir. I'll be glad to get to my bunk."

"I'm afraid you won't get there just yet," Holme said dryly. "We leave here on this tide, and look sharp. We must get under weigh in ten minutes, or we shan't get over the East Wick salterns. Give me one of the sculls."

The two men bent to their work with a will. But Outen had let the dinghey run down fifty yards with the stream, and every inch of this had to be fought against a slopping tide. More than half of the ten minutes had gone when they climbed up on the deck. Outen looked at his watch.

"I doubt if we do it, sir," he said. "The tide has been running out for three hours."

"Confound you," said Holme, "get to work. We must get as far as we can." He had made up his mind that he would be out of sight of Heatherstone Hall when the day broke. He did not wish to set eyes on it again.

The two men set to work with a will. In less than

two minutes they had set the mainsail, and it began to flap in the southerly breeze. In another two minutes the tiller was in place, put hard down and pinned, and Outen was making fast the jib halliard. The jib sheets cracked backward and forward like writhing snakes. Then both men set to work on the anchor. In another four minutes it came up black and dripping from the water. Outen held out the jib to catch the wind. Holme sprang back to the tiller, let the main sheet run out, and the boat swung round and started on her journey.

For the first four miles they were running with the wind and tide, and the *Rover* slipped past the banks like a steam-launch. Holme changed his dress clothes for a blue jersey and a pair of old trousers. Then he lit his pipe and sat at the tiller, his eyes alert for every mark on the bank. He knew every inch of the channel, and crossed from side to side of the creek to get the best water. Once only did he glance behind him, and then he saw the white walls of Heatherstone Hall shine out from a circle of trees, and the hill looming dark against the sky. In the wake of the boat the water swirled and eddied in wreaths and ripples of silver. He sighed. But for all that, he knew that the glittering path behind him only led back to dishonour, and that the dark waters before him represented the road that he was bound to tread.

The *Rover* reached the bend in the creek in twenty minutes. Outen hauled in the main sheet and set the foresail and topsail. The boat lay over on her side in a freshening breeze, and the water, which had been silent

while they ran before the wind, began to hiss and splash and bubble at the bows. Holme looked up critically at the canvas, and gave a few orders to Outen, who began to tighten sheets and halliards. Holme liked his sails to set well, even when there was no one to see them. The moon shone on the rounded curves, and they looked like the firm plumage of a white gull.

They moved a trifle more slowly now, and Holme's eyes watched the creek as a tight-rope walker watches his rope. The water was certainly running out very fast, and the channel was not more than thirty feet across in places. Here and there a black saltern showed its ugly little hump above the water and split the channel into two narrow rivers. Three miles away the mound, on which the Red House stood, showed up against the flat land around it. Holme looked at his watch.

"We shan't do it, Outen," he said. "We touched just now, and though it's deeper before we get to the Red House, it's a lot shallower at East Wick. Just go for'ard and stand by the anchor."

Outen went into the bows and kept a sharp lookout at the water ahead. When they were within a mile of the Red House the wind began to die away and more than once the sails flapped. However, they drifted down with the stream, and there was just enough breeze to steer by. Then suddenly Outen gave a cry of surprise.

"Put her round, sir," he yelled; "put her round quick."

Holme jammed down the helm, but the boat refused

to come about against the tide. Outen tumbled the anchor overboard and the chain went rattling over the bow. The sails flapped idly, but the tide swung the boat round. Outen checked the cable and the boat brought up with a jerk. At the same moment the stern crashed into something and the whole vessel quivered with the shock. Holme looked over the stern, but could distinguish nothing in the shadow beneath the keel.

"What is it?" he cried out angrily.

For answer Outen pointed to the shore on either side. Holme saw a long thin line run from the bank, disappear in the water, reappear on the other side of the creek, and continue its course to the opposite bank. It was just such an obstacle as selfish landowners on the Thames put across the backwaters which run through their territory—a stout chain hung from shore to shore. Holme uttered a savage oath and scowled at the Red House, which lay one hundred and fifty yards from them.

"I'll teach the scoundrel that the creeks don't belong to him," he muttered. "Can't we break clear of the cursed thing, Outen? We shall smash our rudder."

"We can pull in a bit of cable, sir, but not much. The bottom of this creek doesn't hold very well, and the tide's running like a mill-race. We want as much chain as possible."

"Well, let's pull her clear of this cursed chain. Then we'll go ashore and talk to Mr. Jordison." Holme had very good reasons for avoiding the man, but he forgot them in the heat of his anger. He would teach this upstart that to buy the land on either side of the creek con-

ferred no right to the waters that flowed between the banks. He did not realise that the meeting was exactly the object Jordison had in view.

They hauled in some of the anchor chain, stowed sail, and rowed ashore in the dinghey. It was now past two o'clock in the morning, and there was no light to be seen in any part of the Red House. The two men waded up to the bank through the mud, and, making their way to the door, kicked on it with their heavy boots. The noise reverberated through the house, but no one stirred within. Holme stepped back a few paces and looked at the cracked walls and empty window-frames. He had, of course, heard of the explosion, but he knew that Jordison had not left the neighbourhood.

They walked round to the other side of the house and thundered at the back door. For five minutes they kicked at the woodwork, until they had knocked in the two bottom panels. Then suddenly a streak of yellow light came from behind them and threw their shadows on the wall of the house. They turned round and saw that it came from an open door in the stables, and that the dark figure of a man was silhouetted against it. They left the house and walked toward him.

As they drew near he took the lantern from the table behind him and let it hang from his hand, so that the light fell full on their faces, and his own was in darkness.

"Who are you?" he cried, "and what the devil do you mean by making a disturbance at this time of night?"

Holme recognised the voice, but he would certainly have been surprised if he could have seen the face, which

was lit with a smile of triumph, and betrayed none of the annoyance that the words implied.

"I am Arthur Holme," was the sharp reply, "and my boat is caught up on some cursed obstacle that you have put across the creek. You have got to remove it at once."

"The creek is mine. The land on either side is mine."

"You are evidently a stranger to the customs of these parts. Every man has a right of waterway up the creeks. You must take it down at once. Of what use is it to you?"

"I am making a ferry from one bank to the other," Jordison replied, chuckling to himself at the fertility of his own imagination. "I want to get carts across to carry reeds from the marshes."

"You are acting against the law, Mr. Jordison, and the chain must come down."

"I will risk the law, but I have no wish to hinder your boat. I will have the chain lowered."

He stepped inside the door and closed it behind him. Holme and Outen waited outside till he reappeared with Lipp and Jermy.

"My two servants will go down with your man," said Jordison, "and loose the chain. In the mean time I want a word with you, Mr. Holme. If you will come inside the harness-room, and excuse my rough hospitality, I will give you a glass of good whisky and a really passable cigar."

"I have no wish to talk to you," Holme replied. "I want to get under weigh at once."

"You have lost the tide now. You cannot clear East Wick salterns. You will have to wait at least five hours. I have something important to say to you, and if you refuse to come in with me, well, you certainly won't get past the chain unless you bring some more men to help you."

Holme shrugged his shoulders. A few minutes' conversation was of no importance one way or the other. He particularly wished to make the sea by daybreak.

"I'll come," he said abruptly, and went inside with Jordison.

The other three men disappeared round the corner of the house. Jordison poured out two glasses of whisky, and, offering a cigar to his guest, lit one himself.

"Now, then, Mr. Holme," he said, looking the young man straight in the face, "I am going to ask you a question. I asked it you before, and you departed somewhat unceremoniously without answering it. This time it will take a more precise form. Tell me what you know of the death of Richard Behag."

Holme was silent. He had expected this question and had already resolved to give no answer. But he did not expect what was to follow.

"Tell me what you know of the death of Richard Behag," Jordison repeated slowly, "and tell me whether you know anything of Arthur Sterious, who is said to have killed him."

Holme half rose from his chair, and his face grew white. But he recovered himself.

"You seem to know all about it, Mr. Jordison," he replied. "I can't tell you more than what is common gossip in Valparaiso. Why are you so interested in the story?"

Jordison looked at the speaker from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"I was a great friend of Sterious's father," he said. "He has written to me, and asked me to search for his son in England. New facts have come to light which have proved Sterious to be innocent. Can you tell me anything about him?"

Holme smiled; the story was a trifle weak.

"Why should I know anything?"

"Arthur Sterious is in this neighbourhood," Jordison answered, and watched the effect of this well-aimed shot.

"Really! I don't know the gentleman."

For answer Jordison pulled out a gold watch and flung it on the table. Holme glanced at it and rose to his feet. But he controlled his agitation.

"Very interesting," he said. "May I ask where you found it?"

"In one of the gullies in the marshes. Now do you know anything of Arthur Sterious?"

Holme was silent.

"You refuse to give me the information?"

"I do refuse."

"I must have it."

Holme laughed.

"How do you propose to get it?" he asked.

Jordison took the revolver from his pocket, and, looking at it, glanced at Holme and smiled.

"Do you intend to shoot me?" the young man asked.

"Not I. Dead men cannot speak, and I want you to speak. But you do not leave here until you tell me what I want to know."

"I can tell you nothing."

Jordison went to the door, and taking a whistle from his pocket blew three shrill calls upon it. A few seconds later Holme heard cries and the splashing of water. Then there was a wild shriek for help and then silence. He sprang at Jordison, who blocked up the doorway, but the latter moved aside. Holme tripped and came with a crash to the ground. The next moment the two were locked in each other's arms. In a minute Lipp and Jermy came running up, and the three soon overpowered Holme. He was gagged, bound hand and foot, and carried to the Red House. Lipp was set to watch by him till the morning.

"I think you will speak, Mr. Holme, before I have done with you," said Jordison as he left the room.

CHAPTER XVII

THE COUNTESS OF HEATHERSTONE

One winter's evening, a few weeks after the events narrated in the last chapter, two women sat in the Countess of Heatherstone's boudoir. The room was on the first floor and looked over the marshes to the sea. A door opened from it into another apartment, which was used as a dining-room. Another door opened from this into a bedroom, the same room where Jordison had tried his prentice hand at burglary.

For two years the whole world, to the Countess of Heatherstone, had consisted of these three rooms and the semicircle of country which she could see from her windows, and the latter was but a fairyland, untrod, unvisited, and no more real than the scenes portrayed in books and pictures.

She never descended from her apartments to the whirl of society that moved through the palatial reception-rooms beneath her. She had no part in her husband's life. She received no visitors save those of her own family. Strangers coming to the house for the first time scarcely knew of her existence. For all practical purposes she might have been dead. Mistress of the most magnificent establishment in the east of England, she saw none of its glories, and held converse with none of

the great leaders of men that came to stay under its roof. Her husband, kind and sympathetic, came to see her three times a day. The hours were marked out and observed with strict regularity. He came to the minute, stayed exactly half an hour, and departed. Her step-daughter came in and out at all times. Her presence was a ray of sunshine, but the sick woman was not sorry to be left to her own darkness. The fair and beautiful girl served only to remind her of what she herself had been. Her son, the only thing she loved on earth, was dead.

Lady Heatherstone was a comparatively healthy woman, and the doctor promised her long years of life. But two years previously a terrible and loathsome disease had attacked her, and left such frightful ravages on her face that she would not even let her husband look upon it. For two years no living soul had seen beneath the black silk hood that veiled it from the crown of her hair to her shoulders. Lady Heatherstone never unveiled, save when she was alone. It was noticeable that there was only one looking-glass in any of the three rooms, and that this was covered with a thick piece of black velvet.

In this manner she had resolved to live until death released her. It was a living death, but she had not the strength to face the world again. In years gone by she had been the most beautiful woman in the county. Now the veriest scarecrow among women could thank God that she had not the face of the great Countess of Heatherstone.

On this particular evening, Lady Agnes Cliffe had looked in to chat with her stepmother for a few minutes before going to bed. The Countess sat at a large rose-wood and ormolu table, arranging a pile of russia and morocco leather cases in front of her. In one hand she held a pencil, and, opening one case after another, she ticked off the various items on a piece of paper.

Lady Agnes sat a couple of yards away, and watched her stepmother listlessly. Her face was very white and tired. All the brightness seemed to have died out of it. Life had begun to deal hardly with this young girl, who had hitherto known so little of sorrow. The first blow fell when Lord Overcliffe was killed; the second when Arthur Holme said "Good-bye" to her forever; the third, a thousand times more terrible, more certain and more irrevocable, when she heard that his yacht had been found drifting off the Essex coast, and that the dead body of Outen had been picked up near the mouth of the Long Haven creek.

It was quite clear to her that Holme was dead, though the inquest on Outen gave no clue to the mystery of the death of either man. There was no doubt that the sailor had been drowned, and the coroner's jury expressed no further opinion on the matter. The *Rover* had certainly not foundered, and it seemed inexplicable that her two occupants, both experienced sailors, should have come to grief in fair weather. The mystery was intensified by the fact that the boat was found drifting with all her sails stowed and her anchor on board.

Lady Agnes had read every word of the evidence, and,

though it told her nothing, it seemed to leave no room for any hope. Undoubtedly Arthur Holme was dead, and one day the sea would give up the body to the shore.

The Countess of Heatherstone knew her stepdaughter's story, and was not ill-pleased with the termination of so unpromising a love-affair. She cared very little for the girl's future happiness, but the traditions of the great Heatherstone family had been ground into her soul, and she had no sympathy with a *mésalliance*. She was not altogether sorry that a cloud was blotting out some of the sunshine of a fair young life. The clouds were very dark above her own head, and the thought of another woman's happiness was gall to her.

This evening, however, she had no thought for anything but the blue, crimson, and green leather cases in front of her. They were of all shapes and sizes, but each one was stamped with the Heatherstone crest and coronet. A few, more faded than the others, and relics of a more ostentatious period, were impressed with the full armorial bearings of the family—coat-of-arms, crest, coronet, supporters, and motto.

Every one of these cases, and there were one hundred and fifteen in all, contained jewels. Specimens of nearly every gem of the earth were hidden in these little leather shrines. Rings, brooches, bracelets, and tiaras flashed one by one into view as the Countess raised the covers and checked the contents on her piece of paper. She looked at each one lovingly, though the sight of them was not untinged with sorrow. As wife of the Earl of

Heatherstone she had dazzled many a jealous eye with their splendour, and moved through many a stately room encrusted with their rainbow fire. Now they were for her eyes alone. She idly remembered how one newspaper in the days of her beauty had spoken of her as "Venus masquerading as the Queen of Sheba."

Lady Agnes watched her stepmother in silence. Like most women she loved jewels, but her thoughts were far away, and she scarcely noticed the flash of emeralds, diamonds, and rubies, as case after case was opened and closed. Once, however, her attention was forced by some remark of her stepmother's about the famous pearl necklace. Then for a moment she grasped the whole scene and shuddered. She saw nothing of the lustrous beauty of the pearls, but only the grotesque horror of the masked face glaring at the splendid ornament which would probably rest in its case till the owner was dead.

At last the Countess finished her task, and, folding up the piece of paper, she went to an *ecritoire*, and placed it in one of the drawers.

"They're all here, Agnes," she said. "They go to the bank to-morrow. Your father insists upon it."

"He is probably right," Lady Agnes replied. "After what has happened it would be unsafe to leave them here."

"Yes, it would certainly be unsafe. They will come again for them."

"Of course it is better to put them in the bank," said Lady Agnes quietly; "they are determined to have

them, and they will take your life if it stands in their way."

The Countess opened one of the drawers of the *ecritoire* and pulled out something that glittered. It was a large nickel-plated revolver, no toy, but a serviceable weapon.

"I keep this for them," she said; "it is loaded, and lies under my pillow at night. I pray for them to come. I do not want the jewels removed to a place of safety. They will not come if the bait is taken away. And Overcliffe has yet to be avenged."

A look of fear crossed Lady Agnes's face. She wondered how her stepmother would fare in a contest with a desperate man who would be, in all probability, fully armed.

"I am glad the jewels are going," she said. "The law will avenge poor Overcliffe. It is not a woman's work. It is beyond her power."

"If they come, I will kill them," the Countess replied. "I will hide and shoot them from my hiding-place. I can shoot, Agnes, and this is no toy. You know I can shoot."

Lady Agnes nodded her head. She had seen her stepmother some years ago put five shots running into a playing-card at a distance of twenty paces.

"I will kill them, kill them, kill them," muttered the Countess. "I pray every night that they will come. By a wretched chance I was in here asleep the last time they came. But I will not be found asleep again."

Lady Agnes rose to her feet and crossing over to her

stepmother's side, took her hand. "Good-night," she said tenderly; "and please let me take that revolver. I am so afraid."

"Tush, child," the Countess answered. "I can take care of myself, and if I get killed that does not matter to any one. It certainly does not matter to me."

Lady Agnes stooped down and kissed her stepmother's hand. This was the nearest approach to an embrace that was ever offered to Lady Heatherstone. The black hood hung like a barrier against any more affectionate demonstration.

Lady Heatherstone patted the girl's cheek, and then putting it between her two hands, looked earnestly at the beautiful face.

"Good-night, Agnes," she said. "We all of us have our troubles. Some of us deserve them, and some do not."

Lady Agnes burst into tears and went hurriedly from the room. Lady Heatherstone was left to her own reflections. She replaced the revolver in the drawer and rang the bell. In a few seconds her maid entered. She slept and lived a few yards down the corridor. The bell rang in her room and was placed over her bed.

"You may go to bed, Brown," Lady Heatherstone said. "I will undress myself to-night."

The maid disappeared. It was after eleven o'clock, and she was glad to be released from her duties.

Lady Heatherstone went over to the table, which was covered with the jewel-cases. A massive steel door stood wide open in the wall, and she glanced at it. Then,

taking up the largest case, the one that contained the famous emerald tiara, she carried it across the room and placed it in a corner of the safe. Then suddenly an idea seemed to strike her. She took the case out again and, returning to the table, drew out the tiara from its velvet nest and placed it on her head. It looked grotesque and horrible on the top of the black hood.

Then she began to open the cases one by one and transferred their contents to her own person. When she had finished she glittered like a column of rainbow-coloured fire. Every finger was crammed with rings, her arms were circled almost to the elbows with bracelets, every available inch of her dress was encrusted with stars and crescents and suns of flaming gems. Round her throat—round the neck of the hood—were a dozen necklaces, drooping down in sparkling curves of light. She had to be satisfied with a single tiara. It glowed on her head like sunlight through the greenery of a great forest in early spring.

She crossed over to the square of black velvet on the wall, and seizing it in one hand drew it back with a crash and rattle of brazen rings. A cluster of light shone above her head, and she saw herself full length in the glass. From head to foot she sparkled like a galaxy of white and coloured stars. With every movement of her body ripples of fire ran over her, and every point of flame burst out in glittering splendour. The head alone, which should have been the crowning glory of the whole magnificent spectacle, was a mere patch of inky darkness.

For ten minutes she stood before the glass, swaying from side to side, moving backward and forward, now bowing low to the ground, now leaning back with hands thrown over her head. Posing in every attitude, but always moving and never still, and with points of flame continuously flashing and rippling over her from head to foot.

Then she suddenly stopped, laughed bitterly, and drew the curtain back with a crash. The play was over.

One by one she replaced the jewels in their cases, and carefully deposited each case in the safe. Then she turned the two keys in the lock, threw one into a china vase on the mantelpiece and placed the other in her pocket. Then she took the revolver from the drawer of the *ecritoire*, and, turning out the lights, made her way to her bedroom.

CHAPTER XVIII

FACE TO FACE

The Countess of Heatherstone had firmly resolved not to sleep that night. It was the last night that the Heatherstone jewels would be in the house. Lord Heatherstone, in spite of her own wishes, had blazoned this information over the whole country. He had no wish for his house to be any longer the happy hunting-ground of the criminal classes. It was certain that if the thieves intended to make another attempt, they would make it that night. Lady Heatherstone wished to be awake to receive them.

But Nature, who follows her own fixed laws, and takes small account of human wishes, had ordained otherwise, and Lady Heatherstone was sound asleep in less than half an hour. The mask was laid aside, and her right hand grasped the revolver under her pillow. The merciful darkness shrouded her as she lay there with bare face, and her fingers on the weapon.

About two o'clock she woke from her sleep with a start. A wild dream of vain pursuit after her son through long tracts of desolate and mountainous country had terminated in a catastrophe. Lord Overcliffe had flung himself from the edge of a precipice; **she had**

grasped at him as he disappeared, slipped, and sank swiftly downward through the darkness. Her very soul and life seemed to be drawn from her as she dropped through the air like a stone. The bottom rose to meet her—a lake of fire dotted with jagged rocks. But she never reached the bottom. She awoke, gasping for breath, bathed in a cold perspiration, trembling in every limb.

She switched on the electric light by the edge of her bed and peered round the room, half expecting to see Lord Overcliffe swimming away from her through that lake of fire. But she only saw the white and gold decorations of her bedroom, and, sitting up, she began to grasp the realities of life, and to understand that she had been sleeping at the post of duty.

She sat up in her bed and listened. At first she heard nothing but the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Then she heard a sound that sent the blood more quickly through her veins—a low grating sound, as though some one were cutting laboriously through a plate of glass or steel. She crept quietly out of bed, flung a robe of black velvet lined with sable about her and put the hood over her face. Then she slipped the revolver into one of the pockets of her dressing-gown, switched off the electric light, and went to the door that opened into the dining-room. Here she listened attentively and the noise seemed clearer and more definite. She looked through the keyhole, but saw no trace of light. Then she opened the door softly and crept into the dining-room. The noise grew still more distinct.

She crossed the room on tiptoe and looked through the keyhole of the door that led into her boudoir. The small dimensions of the aperture limited her range of vision, and she could see nothing save that there was a light in the room. The noise had ceased. She wondered if the door was locked. She turned the handle very softly and slowly and pulled it toward her. The door opened half an inch, and she let the handle turn quietly back into its original place. She smiled at the artlessness of the thief within. An accomplished burglar would surely have locked all the doors before he commenced his work.

She looked through the narrow slit and saw a man kneeling before the safe. A small lantern threw a circle of light a foot in diameter on the steel door. He was holding something in his hand close to the lock. It looked like a small penholder, with two thin tubes running from it into the darkness behind him.

Then she saw him light a match and apply it to the point of the penholder. A thin white spear of flame shot out and there was a noise like the hiss of an angry serpent. The kneeling form looked like a shadow picture against the blinding light.

Then suddenly the man turned round, and catching hold of the lantern, threw its rays on the door. The Countess had made no sound, but the thief hears a thousand noises that have no real existence, and his keen eye can detect the slightest change or movement in his surroundings.

Jordison saw that the door was open. The crack was

so small that it might have passed unnoticed, but to him it was as plain as a yawning chasm. He knew that the door had been shut, and he thought that he had locked it. He extinguished the oxyhydrogen jet, rose to his feet, and walked quickly across the room.

But before he could reach the door it was flung wide open, the electric light was switched on, and he was confronted by the Countess of Heatherstone.

He would have sprung at an ordinary woman and choked her into silence before she could scream. But he stepped back in horror at the apparition that stood before him. The black velvet robe with the two eyes glittering from the black hood on the face produced so weird an effect that for a moment he thought he was in the presence of some visitor from the spiritual world.

He recovered himself in a few seconds. He had heard the story of the Countess of Heatherstone, and knew who stood before him. But he recovered himself too late. He was now too far from the woman to reach her before she could scream and arouse the household. And there was something in store for him that he had not counted on. Before he could say a word or move a step he was covered by a revolver. He saw from the way it was handled that it was no toy, but a dangerous weapon in the grasp of one who knew how to use it. Quick as thought his own hand went to his pocket, but his revolver was entangled in a piece of torn lining. The two eyes watched him from their peep-holes, and before he could free his weapon the Countess spoke.

"Keep your hand where it is," she said quietly. "If

you move it an inch, I shall fire. I am a good shot—for a woman.”

Jordison did not move. He glared like a wild beast caught in a trap. His fierce, haggard face was distorted with rage and fear. The mere fact that he was at the mercy of a woman accentuated the indignity of his position.

“Take out your weapon by the barrel,” continued the Countess, “and lay it on the table beside you. If I see that your fingers are on the butt I will shoot you without another word.”

Jordison ground his teeth in fury, but he obeyed. For one moment he thought of risking everything on a chance shot. But the odds were against him, and, whatever happened, he would rouse the household. He resolved to bide his time.

“Now walk back to the wall. Quick!” He obeyed. The Countess stepped forward, picked up his revolver, and placed it in her pocket. Then she sat down in a chair, ten feet from where he stood. Jordison glanced at the open window. His only hope lay in Lipp, who watched below. If the man could creep quietly up the ladder and shoot this termagant of a woman, all might yet be well. The motor waited on the road by the creek, and if they could only regain it, pursuit would be useless.

But the Countess saw his glance, and with a woman’s wit defined his thoughts. She crossed to the window, closed and bolted it, let down the blind, and drew the curtains. Yet never for a moment did she take her eyes off Jordison.

"Now," she said, when she had completed her task, "will you explain exactly what you want, and who you are? I think I have seen your face somewhere before."

The two eyes glittering through the holes in the mask seemed to be searching every feature of his face, and he shrank from her gaze.

He knew that it was very unlikely that they had ever met before, and certainly not since he had been in Essex. At any rate she could not identify him as William Jordison, of the Red House. But in spite of this assurance he felt ill at ease. There was something in her look that cowed his fierce spirit. He felt that he was at a disadvantage, for he could not see her face, or read what was passing in her mind. He had no answer to give to her questions. But he had to speak, if only to gain time.

"You know well enough what I want," he replied sullenly, after a pause, "and it doesn't matter to you who I am." She continued to gaze at him. Then she laughed.

"No," she said slowly. "I don't care what your name is. I think I have seen you before. It is enough for me that you are a thief and—a murderer." She brought the last word out with so ominous an emphasis that Jordison's blood ran cold. He knew well enough now what he had to expect, and that a lioness robbed of her cubs would be more merciful than the woman who stood before him.

"A murderer," she repeated in a cold, even voice, "the murderer of my son, of my only child. He was all that I had in the world. For two years I have endured

a living death, and the sight of him was all that kept me from killing myself. Now he is dead, and it is you who have killed him."

The cold sweat gathered on Jordison's brow. He could not see the speaker's face, but the eyes were like those of a basilisk, turning him to stone. The chill of death was in her voice; but under the cold judicial tone of her speech lay some awful volcano of thought, intense, vibrating with passionate hatred, hot as the very fires of hell. He saw that he had fallen into a trap, and that he would be shot like a wild beast without mercy.

He glanced round the room, endeavouring to formulate some plan of escape, but only two things were clear to him—the nickel-plated revolver and the pitiless eyes that watched every expression on his face. He knew, however, that he must retain his presence of mind, and, striving to affect an air of indifference, he smiled, and leaned carelessly against the wall.

"You are mistaken, Lady Heatherstone," he said pleasantly, "I did not kill your son."

"Not with your own hands," she muttered, "perhaps not with your own hands; but you saw him die. One does not make such nice distinctions with a gang of murderers. The one who does the deed does it for all his fellows. My son's death lies at your door, and I thank God that he has given you into my hands."

"What do you intend to do?" asked Jordison. He needed no answer to this question, but he still wished to gain time.

"I am going to kill you," she replied. "I ought to

hand you over to the hangman, but I will spare you the horrors of our penal system, the black cap, the open grave, the whine of the chaplain, the burial-service read over a living man. I will be merciful, and shoot you myself. Perhaps I shall rest when I have avenged my son. Each night he cries out to me from his grave."

He was silent. His mind harked back to the days of the Inquisition, when masked figures, like the one before him, sat in judgment and consigned heretics to the torture of fire and steel. The very thought of death was agony to him. Life had no pleasure for him, but there was more than one duty to be done before he died. By a strange irony of fate the avenger was to become the victim of a vengeance as stern and unsparing as his own. He moved his right hand from behind his back, and looked at the ring upon his forefinger—that flat opal given him by Marie de la Mothe, once a pledge of love, now the symbol of undying hatred. He set his teeth at the sight of it, and resolved to have a last fling for life. He pressed it to his lips, in no spirit of tenderness, but as a knight of old might have kissed his sword before he went into battle. It was a kiss that tasted of blood.

The Countess of Heatherstone watched the movement, but it inspired her with no pity for her victim. If this man had some one who loved him, some wife, some sweetheart who had given him the ring, so much the better. The woman should suffer as she herself had suffered.

Then, as he moved his hand from his lips, she caught

sight of the ring. With her mind full of dark passion she had not noticed it before. It was not a very noticeable thing, for the opal had worn dull and lustreless. But now her woman's curiosity prompted her to glance at the token which seemed so precious to a man about to die. She saw it, and stepping forward a pace, saw it still more clearly.

Then she gave a cry of horror, and the revolver dropped to her side. Jordison saw his chance and sprang at her, but she was too quick, and he recoiled from the muzzle of her weapon. He did not notice how it trembled in her hand.

"That ring," she said slowly, trying to speak in a calm voice, "where did you get it? Who are you? Where did you get that ring?—the opal ring I mean," and she looked hard at his face, trying to read from it another face that always looked out on her from the past. But time and penal servitude and misery and despair and the wrecking of mind and soul can do much to change the features of a man. Jordison was silent. He saw no reasons for gratifying a woman's curiosity at a moment like this. He was still thinking how he could get the better of his adversary.

"You will not speak," she replied. "Then I will speak for you. Your name is John Porteous, and that ring was given you by Marie de la Mothe."

The words fell on Jordison's ear like a clap of thunder. He moved forward and stared at the speaker. But the black mask hid everything he wished to see from his view. For more than a minute he stood thus, as though

turned to stone. The revolver was still pointed at his heart.

"Are you not John Porteous?" she continued; "answer me. You are very near to death. Tell me the truth."

"I was John Porteous," he replied mechanically, "and who are you?"

"I am the Countess of Heatherstone," she said, "but because you are John Porteous, and because you kissed that ring on your finger, I cannot kill you. Go!" And she pointed to the window. He did not move.

"Go!" she cried, "or I may repent—I hear the voice of my son crying out to me." She lowered the revolver and he moved toward the window, passing close to her. He knew well enough now who she was, and why the face of the young Lord Overcliffe had recalled some one in his past life.

Then suddenly the devil took possession of his heart, and he did the foulest deed of his life. He turned suddenly upon her, pinioned her arms to her side, took both the weapons from her, and flung her from him, so that she staggered back against the wall.

For a moment he looked at her, then he sprang at her throat. She screamed horribly.

"You are Marie de la Mothe," he cried, "and I have sworn to kill you. I am not so merciful as you." Then his madness went from him as suddenly as it came to him. He released his grip and looked at her with a sneer.

"No," he said, "I cannot kill you now, for you have

given me my life. God has punished you. I am glad your son is dead. I am glad that——” He seized her hood and tore it from her face.

Then he stepped back and broke into peals of laughter. She tried to hide her awful features in her hands, but he tore them away and still laughed. She moaned like a dying animal. There were voices and sounds in the passage. Jordison locked the door leading into the other room, and returned to her again, and once again tore her hands from her face.

“The beautiful Marie de la Mothe,” he said, looking closer into her eyes. The wretched woman shrieked and shrieked again. Then she caught the switch of the electric light and the room was plunged into darkness, and she sank in a heap to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX

AN INQUISITION

Jordison heard the crash of breaking doors as he slid swiftly down the ladder to the garden. He threw the ladder to the ground, called out to Lipp to follow him, and, looking back as he ran across the lawn, he saw the Countess' apartments flooded with light and two figures leaning out of the window. A second later they disappeared.

He was glad he had removed the ladder. He had gained at least a minute's start. Fortunately the night was dark and rather foggy, and when the two men reached the park, and the rustle of bushes or crunch of gravel no longer gave a clue to their pursuers, they breathed more freely. They saw a half-dozen lanterns moving rapidly to and fro behind them, and heard men calling out to one another. Their pursuers would have nothing to guide them in their search, and the park was a large place.

When at last they reached the spot where the motor stood under the shadow of a great cypress-tree, they could only see one light, and that was several hundred yards to the north and close to the road. They started the machinery and the car glided silently away to the south. It was the opposite direction to the way they

wanted to go, but Jordison was determined to take no risks. If the man who carried that single light caught sight of a motor, he might draw unpleasant but correct conclusions.

It took them an hour to reach the Red House. Jordison had to drive slowly, for he was driving without a headlight, and they had to traverse a series of narrow lanes, in places half a foot deep with mud and loose stones.

When he had run the motor into the shed, he went over to the stables, unlocked the door of the harness-room and lit a lantern. Then he poured himself out a stiff glass of whisky and water and ate a thick chunk of bread with a slice of cold bacon laid on it. When he had finished his frugal meal he went out and, locking the door behind him, made his way up a flight of stone steps to the small loft which he had appropriated as his bedroom.

He lit a pipe and began to undress. The bed looked cold and unattractive by the light of the lantern. He began to think it was scarcely worth while taking off his clothes. It would be daybreak in another three hours. He put on his waistcoat again, and, taking down a heavy fisherman's jersey from a peg on the wall, thrust it over his head and struggled into it. Then he flung himself down on the outside of the bed and tried to go to sleep.

He was thoroughly exhausted both in mind and body. But sleep does not always confer favours where they are most wanted. Jordison closed his eyes, lit pipe after pipe to soothe his brain, but he could not sleep.

The events of that night had stirred his mind into a seething whirlpool of thoughts. To many a man the recollection of how close he had stood to death, and how providentially he had escaped, would have come to the surface; but to Jordison one great central thought floated clear above everything else. He had found Marie de la Mothe.

There was not a single discordant thought of kindness in the black mass of hatred that heaved and tossed in his brain. He did not remember that she had lost her only son, that she was afflicted by a terrible disease, and that, to use her own words, she had found a living death. He did not remember that she had spared his life because he had kissed the ring she once gave him. He only saw the treachery of the past, those long years of hell in a convict prison, years in which she had risen from a somewhat dubious existence to a position second to few held by a woman in England.

The man's moral nature had broken down. He was incapable of discerning between good and evil. He only saw the latter, and he resolved that Marie de la Mothe must die. That would be an easy matter to arrange. The only difficulty had been overcome. She had been found, and a chance meeting had revealed what the expenditure of many hundred pounds of good money had failed to unearth from the secrets of the past.

His thoughts were broken by the clanking of metal in the stables underneath. It was followed by a stifled moan. Then there was a silence, and then a loud rattle of iron as though some beast were trying to break loose

from its chain. He flung himself off the bed and kicked on the floor with his heavy boots. He was answered by another moan. He muttered an oath, and taking a lantern, made his way down the stairs to the open air, and unlocked the stable door.

He entered and, closing the door behind him, walked to the far end, and threw the light of his lantern into a loose box. There, in one corner, on a heap of straw, crouched a man. His hands were fastened together with a pair of handcuffs. One of his legs was chained to a ring in the floor. A thick piece of cord was fastened round his neck, and passed through one of the supports of the manger. His mouth was gagged. He could neither stand up nor lie down with comfort. He crouched in a sitting position, and leant his head against the side of the stall.

Jordison unlatched the door of the loose box. As he entered, the man tried to rise, and his chain rattled. Then he sank back with a moan, and pointed to his mouth.

Jordison placed the lantern on the floor and swinging the man round by his shoulders, stood behind him and unfastened the gag.

"Well, Mr. Holme," he said, walking back a pace or two, "have you decided to speak?"

"Water, for God's sake. Give me a drink of water."

"I told my servant to give you some this morning."

"I have drunk it. There wasn't more than half a tumblerful. You have been giving me salt meat."

"That shall be remedied to-morrow," Jordison replied, with a grim smile. "You shall not have any meat to-morrow, and you can have as much water as you want. There's plenty in the creek."

"Salt water," said Holme, in a low voice. "You devil! By God, if I could be free for five minutes. If you and I were alone in here man to man—just for five minutes, I would not ask a second longer. If you are a man, and have any grievance against me, let me go, and tackle me like a man. If you get the best of it, you can kill me."

"I could kill you just as easily now," Jordison replied. "I have no grievance against you, Mr. Holme. But I have a purpose in life. There's something I wish to find out, and you can tell it to me."

"I can tell you nothing."

"You do not know what is in store for you," Jordison said. "I think you will speak one of these days. Salt water is a poor diet for a healthy man."

"You cowardly cur," said Holme. Then he broke into a string of blasphemous oaths, reviling Jordison, and even reviling the God who had delivered him into Jordison's hands. Jordison stepped forward and kicked him brutally. Holme did not utter a sound, but suddenly rising to his knees, stretched out his wrists and struck with all his strength. The iron handcuffs just missed Jordison's kneecap, as the latter sprang back out of reach. Then he laughed.

"Savage, eh," he said, with a sneer. "I think we can tame you."

Holme sank back on the straw and glared at him like a wild beast.

"Why are you not reasonable?" Jordison continued. "You will be bound to get the worst of it. It is not much I ask of you. You have only to tell me all you know about Arthur Sterious."

"I will tell you nothing," Holme replied doggedly.

"You cannot look me in the face and say you know nothing," Jordison said sternly. "I can see that you are lying. If I thought for a moment that you spoke the truth, I would let you go."

"No, you would not let me go," Holme replied. "You dare not after what has happened."

He referred to his own imprisonment. He did not then know that Jordison had far stronger reasons for keeping him from communication with the outer world. He did not know that William Outen was dead.

Jordison bit his lip with vexation. He saw now that he had made a mistake. Only the hope of release would extract any information from Arthur Holme. And Holme realised that whether he spoke or not there was no hope of release. He would therefore keep his mouth shut. Jordison hastened to remove this impression.

"I shall certainly let you go, Mr. Holme," he said, after a pause. "I shall of course ask you to give me your word of honour not to say anything of what has occurred. But I shall certainly let you go."

Holme looked up keenly into the dark fierce face. "You lie, you scoundrel," he said, "I shall never

leave here alive with your consent. I shall not speak."

"There are ways of making men speak," Jordison replied grimly. "You might come to think of death as something very sweet indeed. You might even be induced to speak by the offer of death. But I will give you one more chance. Do you know if Arthur Sterious is in England?"

Holme was silent.

"How did his watch get into the creek, where we found it?"

Holme was still silent.

"What connection had you with Richard Behag when you were in Valparaiso?"

Still Holme did not answer.

"Do you know anything about Behag's death that is not known to the police of Valparaiso?"

Holme shrugged his shoulders, but still did not reply.

"Do you know whether it was Arthur Sterious or Richard Behag, or both, who defrauded the firm of Sterious & Company, and do you know what cause of quarrel there was between Behag and Sterious?"

At last Holme spoke.

"I have heard all these questions before," he said quietly; "you are wasting your breath and time, Mr. Jordison."

"I will do so no longer," Jordison replied. "I will gag you and leave you to think over them till the morning. Are you going to let me gag you quietly, or must

I use force? You know it has to be done. It **would not** do for any one to hear you."

"I refuse to be gagged until you have given me **some** water."

"You shall have all you want to-morrow."

"For God's sake, give me some water—just a **wine-glassful**."

"Not a single drop until to-morrow. Now, are you going to let me gag you quietly?"

"Come and try it," Holme replied, rising to his knees. In a second Jordison was upon him, and had borne him to the ground. Holme dashed his fists in the man's face, and the blood streamed down his fingers. He fastened his teeth in his hands and bit out a piece of flesh. Both were powerful men, but the contest was too unequal. In less than a minute Jordison had choked Holme into insensibility with the rope that was fastened round his neck. Then he forced open the mouth, inserted the gag and secured it tightly.

When this was done he rose to his feet, and looking down at the prostrate figure, began to fill his pipe. Then he pulled out his matchbox, but his fingers shook with the struggle he had just gone through, and the box fell to the floor. He stooped down, gathered up the matches, lit his pipe and went out of the loose box, locking all the doors after him. In less than half an hour he was asleep.

An hour afterward Holme partly recovered his senses. He was semidelirious, and gurgled inarticulate sounds in his throat. Lights flashed before his eyes, and

strange noises vibrated in his ears. He had dreamt of running water in his swoon, and stretched out his hand to find the water-jug. He found nothing but a single wax match. He turned it round and round in his fingers. Then he laughed horribly—the laugh of a maniac stifled by the gag into a low sobbing moan.

CHAPTER XX

AN ESCAPED PRISONER

When Jordison awoke from his sleep it was still dark. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was 6:30. He had been asleep barely an hour. The sun would not rise for another hour and a half, and turning over on his side he tried to snatch a little more rest before he started the day's work. He had not undressed, and still lay on the outside of his bed.

Just as he had settled his head comfortably on his pillow, and was dozing off to sleep, he noticed a strange smell in the room. He raised himself up on his elbow and sniffed. It was undoubtedly a curious smell, but he did not realise for a few seconds what it was. Then, as he thoroughly roused himself, he recognised the faint pungent odor. It was the smell of something burning.

He jumped off his bed and lit his lantern. The light showed a faint grey haze in the room. He searched carefully for the cause, but found nothing.

Then suddenly a low stifled cry broke the silence of the night. It was followed by the loud rattling of chains, and then by another cry, longer and louder than the first. In a flash Jordison realised where the smoke came from. The stable was on fire underneath him.

He rushed from the room and roused Lipp from a heavy sleep. Jermy snored beside him and Lipp raised a brawny arm for a rude awakening. But Jordison stopped him.

"Let him be," he said hurriedly, "two are quite enough, and if by any chance we cannot put the fire out, well——" He shrugged his shoulders, and Lipp understood. Jermy was a constant menace to both of them.

Lipp thrust on a jersey and a pair of trousers, and followed his master down the stairs. When they got outside, the smoke was pouring through the stable windows, for there was not a pane of glass in any of them. Within, they could see the dull red glow of fire, and, as they neared the door, they heard a long and horrible scream and the clank of chains.

"Quick, Lipp," cried Jordison, handing him the key. "He must be saved at any cost." Lipp did not wait to fumble with the key, but burst the door open with his shoulder. A volume of flames and sparks flew out, and the two men shrank back from the opening. There was another scream, and a hoarse cry for help and the noise of chains being tugged and shaken.

"He is alive and has got his gag off," said Jordison hurriedly. "I expect the fire has not reached him yet. The loose box is made of iron. If he is alive, we can live there too. There's the window. Quick."

They ran to the window at the far end. Jordison tore away the wooden framework with his hands and climbed into the stable. The air inside was comparatively

free from smoke, but was as hot as the blast of a furnace.

In five minutes' time Jordison reappeared and thrust a limp form through the window. A loose chain dangled from one ankle, and a loop of rope was still round the drooping neck. The hands were crossed close together in the iron clasp of the handcuffs. Lipp took the burden from Jordison and laid it on the grass.

"Alive," he said gruffly, but without the faintest show of interest.

"Yes," said Jordison, coughing and gasping for breath, "but pretty well choked. I couldn't have stood another minute of it. One end of the place is like a furnace. Undo those handcuffs and work his arms a bit to put some air into his lungs. He is safe enough at present."

Lipp unfastened the handcuffs, and tried the process recommended for the resuscitation of drowning men. It was, as might have been expected, singularly unsuccessful. Holme neither sighed nor opened his eyes.

"Go down to the creek," said Jordison, "and get some water. I am going to see what I can save. We shall be burnt out to-night. No, stay, you had better come and help me. He is not dead. He can shift for himself. Put on the handcuffs, take him down to the house, and chain him by the legs to something—a bar of the cellar window will do."

These words had a sudden and unexpected result. Holme, who had been shamming unconsciousness, sprang to his feet, dashed one fist in Lipp's face and the

other in Jordison's stomach, and sent them both sprawling. Before they could recover themselves, he had caught up the loose chain in one hand and started down the slope toward the creek.

Holme was a young and athletic man, and with the fifty yards start he had obtained, he reached the creek before his pursuers, in spite of his weakness and the chains encumbering his progress.

He gained the creek, and plunged through the mud until the water reached his waist. Then he struck out for the opposite bank. The weight of the chain became painfully apparent, and he could barely keep his head above water. But he was a powerful swimmer, and he struggled through the incoming tide to a point nearly a hundred yards above the place where he had entered the water.

As he felt the soft mud under his feet once more, he breathed a sigh of relief. From the opposite bank came the report of a pistol, and a bullet sang to the left of him. He flung himself down in the mud and waited. Five more shots went over his head, and then he heard the squelch of mud and the splashing of water.

He rose from his soft, but malodorous bed, and reached the bank. The splashing of water continued. Then he heard a voice cry out that the current was too strong to keep a foothold, and another giving the order to go back. Neither of his pursuers could swim, and for a while he was beyond their reach.

On the opposite bank the stables of the Red House flared fiercely, and he crept on all fours from the lurid

and unwelcome light. He knew that so long as he was a mark for a rifle his life was in danger. Foot by foot he crept out of the glare into the darkness.

He realised that Jordison and Lipp would not give up pursuit, but endeavour to intercept him before he could reach a place of safety. But now all the advantage was on his side. He knew every inch of the creeks and marshes, and before the eastern sky showed grey with the coming dawn he had threaded his way westward, had swum the creek again and was moving across the park to Heatherstone Hall. His chain clanked at every step he made. It was the only refuge at hand, the only shelter where he could find any human beings to protect him.

But as he crossed the lawn his senses reeled, and his strength gave way, and he fell in a heap on the green turf. And there the gardeners found him in the morning, delirious and crying out for water, too weak to move an inch from the place where he had fallen.

The men went indoors with the news, and a crowd of servants gathered on the lawn. They talked volubly, but were uncertain how to act. Lord Heatherstone was not yet down. Lady Agnes was with her stepmother. The whole household were already in a tumult after the events of the previous night, most of which had now become public property.

Lady Heatherstone's maid was the only person who had any definite ideas. She rashly jumped to the conclusion that the prostrate man had some connection with the attempted burglary of the night before. The

chain on his ankle suggested to her mind an escaped convict, and who more likely than an escaped convict to be connected with robbery and violence? She voiced her opinion in shrill tones, and the men, most of whom were, or had been, in love with her, applauded her perspicacity.

Certainly, no one recognised Arthur Holme in the huddled and dripping figure that lay at their feet. His clothes were torn and blackened with smoke. His face was bleeding and smeared with soot, his beard and moustache were scorched into a filthy mass of shrivelled hair. The black mud of the creeks plastered him from head to foot. He was dressed in a rough blue jersey and a pair of old serge trousers. His feet were bare, and his ankles were sore and bleeding where the chain had chafed them.

They resolved to leave him and send for the police. Two of the gardeners picked up the chain and held it in their hands, in case he should attempt to escape. He did not move, but now and then he cried out for water. The womenkind were for giving the poor wretch something to drink. The men, backed up by Lady Heatherstone's maid, decided to do nothing without Lord Heatherstone's permission.

One of the footmen was despatched to acquaint his lordship of their discovery. But, before he reached the path leading to the servants' quarters, Lady Agnes herself appeared from the opposite direction. The crowd of servants opened out and made way for her. She came close up to the prostrate man and looked at him.

His face was thrust down on the turf, so that she could only see the back of his head.

"Who is this?" she asked.

"Water, water," he moaned piteously.

"Get him some water," she said sharply. "Why do you stand staring, and why are you two men holding on to that chain? Do you think he will run away?"

The men laid the chain down sheepishly, and one of them went off for some water. Lady Heatherstone's maid then began to expound her theory, but Lady Agnes cut her short.

"That'll do, Brown," she said. "It doesn't matter who he is. You can see he is half dead. He's been nearly drowned or burnt alive. Pick him up, some of you, and take him into the house. Where's Harland?"

"Gone into Gorehaven, your ladyship," answered one of the gardeners.

"Well, Edwards, you had better take a horse and follow him. Tell Dr. Dowsett to come over at once. This man is very ill. Poor fellow. Poor fellow."

She moved round to the other side of him, and bent down to see his face. He stirred uneasily, and raised it a little from the ground. Then her lips whitened, and she gave a cry of horror, and sinking on her knees, she took his head between her two hands and peered into his features.

"It's Mr. Holme," she cried out, rising to her feet. "Quick, quick, you fools. He is dying. To think that none of you recognised him, and that—— Quick, pick

him up and take him into the house. There is not a moment to be lost."

"Mr. Holme!" echoed one of the servants, feebly. "He is dead."

"He will be if you don't stir yourselves," she cried. "Brown, be at the hall door with a glass of weak brandy and water by the time we reach it, and see that a hot bath is got ready at once."

The maid flew off across the lawn, and two of the men picked up Arthur Holme and carried him into the house. Lady Agnes followed them, and sent the rest of the servants about their business. She had scarcely realised yet that the dead had come to life, and that her lover had been restored to her. She only saw a life in danger, and the necessity for immediate action.

In an hour's time Arthur Holme was in bed, and had regained his senses. Lord Heatherstone stood by his side and questioned him kindly. They had parted in anger, but Holme's helpless condition would have appealed to the hardest heart, and there was much real kindness hidden under the pompous and aristocratic manners of Lord Heatherstone.

Bit by bit Holme told his story. At times he was a trifle incoherent and he often had to stop. Lord Heatherstone did not press for details, but directly he had gathered the main facts he rang the bell.

"Tell some one to go at once to Gorehaven," he said when a maid entered. "He must inform the police that Mr. Jordison of the Red House, and his servants, must be arrested at once for the murder of the sailor William

Outen. In case they may be too late, send half a dozen of the men to the Red House at once to secure these scoundrels, and detain them until the police come. I will take all responsibility."

The girl left the room, and Holme, thoroughly exhausted, closed his eyes and slept. Lord Heatherstone went over to the window, and looked out across the marshes to where the Red House rose against the eastern sky. It was a clear, frosty morning, and he could see it plainly in the sunlight.

He went into his own bedroom and returned with a pair of powerful field-glasses. Then he opened the window and directed them on the ugly red brick building. Nothing stirred, but he could see smoke still rising from the stables, which appeared to have been burnt to the ground.

Then suddenly a cloud of smoke and dust rose from the hill, and several seconds afterward there was a low boom, like the sound of a distant gun. When the smoke cleared away, the Red House was a low and shapeless mass upon the ground. He saw a black oblong thing move swiftly westward along the road between the two creeks.

He uttered a word which was neither parliamentary nor becoming to a man of his position. In less than two minutes the moving object was hidden behind a clump of trees on the lawn. Lord Heatherstone closed the window and went down to breakfast.

By noon the six men had returned. They reported that they had not encountered a living soul on the road, and that the Red House was a mere heap of ruins.

CHAPTER XXI

HUE AND CRY

There was little doubt that three of the murderers had escaped in the motor-car, and that the fourth was dead. A body, charred and consumed beyond all recognition, had been found by the police in the black ruins of the stables. There was no evidence to show whether it was the body of Jordison or that of one of his three servants. No one knew of Susanson's death, and it was commonly supposed that three people had escaped.

Holme, indeed, spoke of only having seen one of Jordison's servants, but it was well known that there had been four men in the house, and it was not extraordinary that a person confined to the four square walls of a loose box should only have come in contact with two of them.

The Red House had tumbled down like a house of cards. Scarcely one brick was left standing on another. It resembled a vast rubbish heap, or a building that had gone through the hands of the house-breakers. It was no longer the semblance of a house, but a mere pile of brick, timber, and plaster.

The police had no hope of finding any bodies in the ruins, for they knew that the house had not been inhabited for some time past, and that Jordison and his servants had made their home in the stables and outhouses.

But they removed every brick till the surface was level with the garden. They did this as a matter of form, and did not pursue their investigations into the cellars, which were entirely choked up with rubbish.

They found no trace of anything, not even of a single piece of furniture. They came to the conclusion that it had all been removed to the stables and that it had perished in the fire. There was an element of weakness in this theory, for it would have been hard to get a houseful of furniture into the stables, but the theory had to serve in default of a better one.

Both Lady Heatherstone and Arthur Holme were carefully questioned and cross-examined. The former withheld all information as to Jordison's real name and past history. The latter gave his evidence to the best of his ability, but slurred over the matter of Arthur Sterious as an unimportant detail and some hallucination of Jordison's brain. Other minor witnesses contributed to the general stock of knowledge, and Lord Heatherstone stated what he had seen from the bedroom window.

The sum total of it all was that William Jordison and his servants were responsible for the murders of Lord Overcliffe and William Outen, and that three of them had escaped from the district on a very powerful motor-car. The latter had been seen on the old Roman causeway by two oyster fishermen, whose boat was lying up one of the creeks. And then all trace of it had vanished as completely as though it had been swallowed up in the ooze of the marshes.

The Essex papers, in commenting on the case, said that the only satisfactory feature of the whole affair was the fact that three such determined ruffians had escaped from the neighbourhood, and that the fourth was dead. One journal, progressive and ultra-Radical, printed some severe remarks about the stupidity of the police—aiming thereby at the government—and even hinted that the evidence of Arthur Holme and Lady Heatherstone was not entirely satisfactory.

The whole affair caused the greatest sensation throughout England and Scotland. Lord Heatherstone added another five thousand pounds to the promised reward, and the enormous sum of ten thousand pounds awaited the fortunate man who could discover the whereabouts of the three murderers.

The hunt which had formerly been confined to a small and little known district on the east coast, now became general throughout the length and breadth of the land. Three men on a motor-car, which report had exaggerated into a monster as big as a railway locomotive, might be found anywhere between John O'Groats and Land's End.

Such a car, as a half-penny evening paper said, annihilated space, and threw all ordinary detective methods into confusion. It might one day be in Yorkshire and the next in Devon, and the next in Inverness. It might be seen anywhere and by any inhabitant in Great Britain.

The Irish alone slept safely in their beds at night. They were not grateful, and construed this pleasing cir-

cumstance into a grievance. The reward was not likely to come their way, where the money was most wanted. The Irish papers pooh-poohed the whole affair.

It was a bad time for the drivers of big cars, especially those who travelled by night. Police traps abounded on every road and enthusiastic amateurs drove madly in pursuit of brother motorists, only to find that they were themselves the objects of pursuit. Accidents occurred with alarming frequency. Half a dozen lives were lost, and there were at least threescore actions for damages. The whole thing would have been laughable if so serious a fact had not been at the root of it.

Of course, the missing car was seen by a thousand correspondents to the daily papers, and, like the sea-serpent, it varied so greatly in size and appearance that no credence whatever could be attached to the different narratives. It became a will-o'-the-wisp, a phantom eluding all pursuit and all attempts at capture. It was sometimes seen in two places, some hundred miles apart, at the same hour. In time the excitement became the ridicule of all sober-minded men, and it died out almost as rapidly as it had arisen.

In two months' time only the police and a few determined seekers after the reward took any further interest in the search. And these worked silently and unostentatiously, following out their own methods and theories without any desire for publicity in the newspapers. They kept their attention fixed, not on powerful cars that travelled by night, but on the list of burglaries that occurred throughout the United Kingdom.

It was possible for the thieves to get rid of their car, but it was more than likely that they would continue to steal. The result was disappointing. Several burglaries occurred in the two months, but in every case the thieves had been captured, and none of them corresponded to the description of Jordison or any of his three servants. It almost seemed as if they had broken up their car and left the country.

Arthur Holme took no part in the general search. It was three weeks before he could leave Heatherstone Hall. He received every attention at the hands of Lord Heatherstone and his wife, but he was not allowed to see or speak to Lady Agnes. He did not mention her name, and her father made no reference to what had passed between them.

Holme was content to catch an occasional glimpse of her from the window. She never looked up at him nor showed any desire to see him. This indifference might have been a source of annoyance to a sick man whose nerves had been considerably shaken. But Holme was strong-minded and sensible. He was sure of her love, and he knew that she acted from motives that could not be ascribed to indifference.

The restraint on his part and the quiet indifference of Lady Agnes did not escape the notice of the shrewd Lord Heatherstone, and the young man rose considerably in his estimation. He had already formed a high opinion of Holme's abilities, and it was no unusual thing for him to spend a couple of hours in the invalid's bedroom and talk seriously to him of political matters.

The noble Earl had every hope of winning over this promising recruit to the Conservative cause. Holme's views on certain matters were fixed and unalterable. But he cared little for party shibboleths. He had the cause of the poor at heart, and he had assisted the Liberal candidate because he thought that by so doing he would further the interests of the poor fishermen in the district. He would have as readily worked for a Conservative candidate if the latter had held out the same bait.

Lord Heatherstone, ex-diplomat that he was, was **not** slow to grasp the situation. He pointed out that in the next general election there would be a reshuffling of the cards. He (the Earl) was a free-trader, and might be separated from his colleagues. Holme was also a free-trader. This would be a bond between them, and would bring them into the same political party, when the whole election was fought out on the question of protection.

Before Holme left Heatherstone Hall they had come to a closer understanding, and Holme had definitely promised his support against any political doctrine that threatened the existence of free trade.

The young man, it is only fair to say, was not entirely disinterested in thus promising his allegiance to the Earl of Heatherstone. During his three weeks of sickness he had thought much of his own career, and the unpleasant conviction had come to him that he was wasting much precious time.

He had not been an idle man since he had been in

Essex. He had the past to blot out, and that meant work. He did not want any spare time to think over his life as a sailor. He wished also, in some measure, to atone for many wasted hours. He had a small income, and was not obliged to work for his bare sustenance.

So he had thought that he could not do better than fling himself heart and soul into the righting of social wrongs, into the alleviation of distress among the poor, into schemes which would raise the workingman socially and morally from his slough of despondency.

The seafaring folk had always been near his heart, and he had narrowed down his general theories to this particular class. He had gone among them as one of themselves, and worked incessantly in their behalf.

His philanthropy had taken the form of labour and not of gifts, which he could not afford. He had raised a considerable sum of money from wealthy people, and built the men a good clubhouse, where they could get both billiards and beer.

He had set to work to study the oyster-fisheries, and had suggested several improvements in the antiquated methods that had been handed down from father to son for more than a century. And in every sense of the word he had proved himself a true friend to these rough but sterling men.

He had grasped from the first the true spirit of the sea, and after he had fought and won two battles on their behalf, one against the interference of the fishmon-

gers' company, and one against the owners of the fore-shore, his name became a word to conjure with.

Every man on the coast and up the creeks had a good word to say for him, and if occasion had offered would have backed up his words with deeds.

Yet in spite of the good work he had done, Arthur Holme felt that he was not making the best use of his life. He had been working within narrow limits, and during the three weeks of his illness he had seen how wide the world was and how much it offered to an earnest man.

Hitherto his work in the creeks and marshes had left no time to think of a wider sphere of action. But he had realised at last that he had ambition, and that if he could only obtain an opening he would thrust all his heart and soul into it and force a way to success.

Such an opening might well be made by the great Earl of Heatherstone. The sphere of politics offers more to an ambitious man than any other in the whole world. And Lord Heatherstone was still a power in the political world.

Holme saw that under the patronage of this somewhat pompous but intellectual aristocrat he might rise to great heights and do much good. It is no shame to him that he resolved to take the opportunity when it offered itself.

Lord Heatherstone was as good as his word, and before Holme had left the house he had given him a start in life.

The oyster-fisheries of the district were at that time

under a cloud. Several cases of typhoid had been traced to the beds which lay up one of the Essex creeks, and the public began to institute a silent but indiscriminate boycott of the oysters of the whole county. An industry which supported many hundreds of hard-working and capable men was threatened almost with extinction. Their outcry would never have reached the ears of Parliament, which had many matters of more importance to discuss, if it had not been for the voice of Lord Harry Quay.

He moved for a commission to inquire into the cause of typhoid in the creek in question, and to suggest some means of purifying the water and restoring public confidence in the Essex oysters. After some haggling, it was resolved that a committee be appointed. It was composed of two doctors, two members of Parliament, two sanitary inspectors, two bacteriologists, and Arthur Holme.

At the suggestion of Lord Heatherstone, the latter was nominated chairman. His practical knowledge of the oyster-fisheries, and his influence with the men employed in the industry outweighed his comparative youth and obscurity. Moreover, it was thought advisable for a lay mind to direct and control the various professional elements of the commission.

With the prospect of this promising entry into public life, Holme resolved to start on a three-weeks' cruise on the *Rover*, hoping that the air of the sea would restore him to perfect health and vigor.

Lord Heatherstone said "Good-bye" to him with gen-

uine regret, and promised him the entire Heatherstone support if he would stand for the western division of Gloucestershire at the next general election. Lord Heatherstone owned large estates in this county, and in his own person represented the balance of political power.

The *Rover*, with two hands on board, for Holme was not yet sure of his strength, was anchored off the park wall. It was a bright, frosty morning, and, as they glided down the narrow creek, Holme's thoughts reverted to the night when he had run, as it were, into the very jaws of hell.

In an hour's time they passed the place where the Red House had once stood. The little hill was almost bare. The police had levelled everything to the ground and scattered the débris over the marshes.

Arthur Holme wondered what had become of the occupants. The hue and cry was still loud over the length and breadth of England. But the excitement of the chase had long left the place where the quarry had first been started. The missing motor had been seen everywhere save in the district where Jordison had first driven it. Essex had contributed nothing but the two murders to the general uproar. It was the source, the fountain-head, but the stream had flowed far from it and into many channels.

A bare hill, naked and ugly in the sunlight, was all that William Jordison had left behind him.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SCOURGE

It was not till three months after the disappearance of William Jordison and his servants that the first clue of their existence came to light. It came, much to the disgust of those who pinned their faith to Sherlock Holmes, to the despised police at Warley Dale in Yorkshire.

A daring burglary had been committed at the country house of a wealthy steel manufacturer. Jewels, valued at twenty thousand pounds, had been stolen, and the thieves had made off without interruption. The loss was not discovered until the next morning.

Mr. Strangways, doubtful of the ability of the local police, wired for a detective from Scotland Yard, but before the man arrived, a stolid Yorkshire constable made a discovery of the greatest importance.

He was searching the lawns and drive for footprints, but there had been a heavy rain the night before, and he found no trace of any kind whatever, except the fresh tracks of the people who had passed up the drive in the morning. Then, as he was walking through some dead and rotting leaves that the wind had gathered into a small ridge by the edge of the path, his foot struck something hard.

Stooping down he picked up a small steel spanner. It was greasy to the touch and smelt strongly of oil. He examined it carefully and found that it was made by the firm of Jacquart et Cie. in Paris. The name conveyed nothing to his mind, but his slow brain grasped the fact that it was a possible clue to the discovery of the burglars. He had a dim idea that it might be part of their equipment for breaking open the safe.

He said nothing to his colleague, but, when the detective arrived from London, he showed him the spanner and asked his opinion. Kennedy, a big, keen-eyed, quiet man, turned it over and over in his hand and smelt it carefully. Then he looked at the name stamped on its surface, and a smile of triumph came over his face.

He already saw himself the possessor of a comfortable income for life; and the little country cottage where he hoped to spend the rest of his days seemed quite near to him.

"Say nothing of this to anyone," he said, after a pause. "It is absolutely necessary that this discovery should not get into the newspapers."

"What is it?" asked the constable.

"It is a spanner for a motor and was made in France. Do these facts bring anything to your mind?"

"A motor?" said the policeman slowly. "Mr. Strangways has a motor."

"A steel manufacturer is hardly likely to get his spanners from France. Besides, the name is quite sufficient clue to the thieves of last night." The constable shook his head. These London detectives were beyond him.

He had read of them in books, and knew that they arrived at wonderful conclusions. Still, he felt proud to be talking to so clever a man, and tried to look intelligent.

"Do you remember the murder of Lord Overcliffe?" the detective continued, "and the story of William Jordison?"

The man's face brightened. He slowly grasped the situation. The reference to the motor became clear to him.

"Ten thousand pounds!" was all that he could gasp out.

"Yes," Kennedy replied, "and half of it is yours if you will keep your mouth shut. If you don't, neither of us will touch a penny. The clue is a certain one. Jordison used to be chairman of Jacquart et Cie. It only remains for us to follow the clue up. This is a great, mark you, a great discovery. But keep your mouth shut. Are you married?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, don't tell your wife anything. Now let's have another look around."

The reappearance of the celebrated black motor-car would have provided many columns for the newspapers, but not a word of the discovery reached them. The robbery attracted but little attention in the London dailies. The police, said *The Daily Telegraph*, had a clue, and were following it up.

In less than a week the whole affair was forgotten. Had it occurred two months earlier half England would

have attributed it to Jordison and his servants, and thousands would have rushed to the spot in the hope of ferreting out some clue. But now it fell flat on a nation that was exhausting all its energies on the fiscal question.

Only Kennedy and the silent, stolid policeman of Warley Dale knew the truth. The one quietly followed up the clue that chance had given him. The other went his daily rounds and kept his mouth shut.

But before another fortnight had passed the Duke of Barstowe's castle in Somersetshire was broken into. A footman was strangled to death, and the famous Barstowe tiara stolen. No trace was found of the thieves, but Kennedy took up the broken thread of his clue again and started on a fresh trail.

The very next week the safe of the Welsh National Bank of Bangor was blown open with dynamite and several hundred pounds in gold were taken. Again the thieves got clear with their booty, and again Kennedy took up the fresh scent.

During the next month another bank was broken into, and there were five great jewel robberies in different parts of England and Scotland. One of them took place in Inverness and another in Sussex, within twenty-four hours of each other, so that it was clear, if the two were the work of the same gang of thieves, that they had at their command some very rapid means of transit. In all these instances the criminals got clear away with their spoil, and left no clue behind them.

It was then that the crime investigator of a half-penny

morning paper wrote a special article for his journal. The article was headed, "Has Jordison Come to Life Again?" and it set forth a reasonable theory that all these robberies were the work of one gang of thieves, and that in all probability Jordison and his accomplices were responsible for the bulk of them.

The indefatigable writer had traced and catalogued a score of smaller robberies, which had hitherto been of purely local interest, and had never been noticed in the London papers—mere thefts of bread and meat and spirits from shops and farmhouses.

He prepared an elaborate plan of dates and places and pointed out that all the minor thefts had occurred on probable lines of route between two successive jewel robberies, and that the dates were consistent with the theory that these small affairs were merely the means of getting food while journeying from one job to another.

The next day the paper published a map dotted with dates and places, and made the theory plain to the meanest intelligence.

Detective Kennedy ground his teeth and swore an assortment of fancy oaths as he read this article, and he tore the map into fifty pieces before he put it on the fire. The same idea had occurred to him, and in his pocket was a piece of paper with a similar list of dates and places.

His own was perhaps a trifle more complete, and included one of vital and peculiar importance, namely, the theft of a few gallons of petrol from a bicycle shop, but substantially the two were the same.

Kennedy cursed the clever fool who had thrown all this information to the public, like pearls before swine. Naturally secretive and silent, he did not understand the true spirit of journalism, which is to shout out all you know as loudly as possible.

Before a week was over, all England fell at the feet of the crime investigator and hailed him as a leader of men. The amateur detectives emerged from their obscurity and once more the drivers of big cars suffered untold annoyance.

The hue and cry was raised all over England. The seekers after the ten thousand pounds reward were perhaps a trifle more cautious than they had been in the first instance, but they proved themselves an intolerable nuisance to all peaceable citizens.

Kennedy saw that the game was up, and that the results of his own patient researches were in the hands of every fool in the United Kingdom. He resolved to make what he could out of his information.

One morning he called at the office of a great evening paper and left there with a substantial cheque in his pocket. That very evening posters flared out all over London with "Authentic News of Jordison," and the first real evidence against this determined criminal appeared in print.

The clamour increased, and the result was quite as the shrewd detective had imagined. The robberies ceased and the thieves retired into their hiding-place.

Arthur Holme had taken no part whatever in the general search for William Jordison. For reasons which were

known only to himself he had no desire to ever meet the man again. He knew, however, that Jordison was more than anxious to get information from him, and he wondered why no attempt had been made to recapture him.

Day and night he had a loaded revolver ready to his hand, for this was the only answer he was prepared to give to any of Jordison's questions. But he was unmolested, and finally came to the conclusion that the man was dead, and that it was the body of the master which had been found in the charred ruins of the stables, and not that of one of his servants.

But, in any case, Holme had been too busy to play the part of an amateur detective. The commission on the oyster-fisheries had occupied four months, and had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. The infected oysters had been traced to three pans in one village. The creeks had been declared free of sewage, and rigorous methods had been instituted by which all danger of future contamination would be avoided.

This result, which reads like the work of a week, was not accomplished without infinite tact and labour. Holme came out of the ordeal with credit. He performed his duties with firmness and delicacy, and laid a restraining hand on all the parties concerned.

If the doctors and scientists had been left to their own devices, the fishermen would have thrown them into the water, to join the oysters. But it was Holme who conciliated the furious and starving men, and showed them how out of much evil might come good.

For a while they obeyed, but looked on him with sus-

picion. But when they found that the end had justified the means, and that the report of the commission had cleared the district of an undeserved opprobrium, they hailed Holme as their deliverer, and placed him on a pedestal that was nearly as high as that of their patron, St. Nicholas.

With all this work in hand, and with the prospect of an election looming in the near future, it can well be imagined that Arthur Holme had no time to spare for detective work. Yet he had read the papers carefully and knew as much of the mysterious thieves as most men.

He had watched with a smile the heat of the first enthusiasm, and the marvellous rapidity with which it had died away. He had noted the long list of burglaries, and read with approval the article which stirred up the dead embers into a blazing furnace. He only wondered why Essex, the source of the whole category of crimes, had no story to add to the fund of general information.

Then one March evening news was brought to him which sent him post haste to Heatherstone Hall, and converted the case of William Jordison from an abstract problem into a personal matter.

The black motor-car had been seen for the first time since the destruction of the Red House, and not only had it been seen, but it had been seen in Essex. And that very same day Lady Agnes Cliffe had gone out for a walk in the park, and had never returned to Heatherstone Hall.

CHAPTER XXIII

NORTHWARD

Lady Agnes Cliffe had disappeared as completely as though the ground had swallowed her up. She had left the house about six o'clock without the knowledge of her parents. One of the gardeners had seen her cross the lawn, and go down through the gate into the park. The evening was a fine one, but there appeared to be no reason why she should have chosen to take a walk so late in the afternoon.

It was probable, therefore, that she had gone out on some special errand. One of the footmen, on being questioned by Lord Heatherstone, reported that he had handed her a letter about 3:30. It had come in by the afternoon post. No trace of the letter could be found in her bedroom, and she had evidently destroyed it or taken it with her.

No special notice was taken of her absence till dinner-time, when she failed to put in an appearance. The search commenced at once and continued all night and the whole of the next day.

Messengers were despatched in every direction in the hope of finding some one who had seen her. But they brought back no information, and the searchers in the

park found no traces of a struggle or anything that would point to an act of violence.

But late that afternoon a sailor, rather the worse for liquor, came up to the Hall and reported that about six o'clock the previous evening he had seen a large motor-car running along the road at the foot of the park.

It was too dark for him to distinguish the number of the occupants or even the colour of the car. He further explained, with a tinge of pride, that he was in no fit state to see anything clearly, having just returned from a long voyage, and having spent most of the previous day in the Plough and Sail at Gorchaven.

This news, told somewhat incoherently, sent a thrill of horror through those who listened to the speaker. There was no doubt in any one's mind that Lady Agnes had fallen into the hands of the arch-ruffian, William Jordison.

There appeared, however, to be no reason for her abduction, unless it had been carried out in the hope of obtaining a ransom. This method of obtaining money did not seem practicable in a civilised and open country. It was possible in the mountains of Spain or Greece, but hardly to be imagined in the lanes and marshes of Essex.

The next morning, however, two people knew why Lady Agnes had disappeared. Both Lady Heatherstone and Arthur Holme received letters from Jordison himself. They had been posted from Up Withing, a small village in Yorkshire, and were somewhat similar in their contents.

One, which would have certainly surprised Lord Heatherstone, ran as follows:

"DEAR MARIE:

"It may be possible to strike you through the death of one you love. One day I hope to strike a harder and more final blow.

W. J."

Lady Heatherstone burnt the letter and was silent as to its contents. The other ran thus:

"DEAR MR. HOLME: The life of the woman you love is in my hands. You know the price of her release.

"W. J."

This letter was brought out to Arthur Holme as he was spending a few days on the *Rover* preparatory to the start of his campaign in Gloucestershire. From the bearer of it he heard the first news of the disappearance of Lady Agnes Cliffe. He hurriedly thrust some things in a bag, returned in the man's boat, and drove thirty miles to Heatherstone Hall.

Lord Heatherstone received him in the library, and told him the little that was known about the affair. In return Arthur Holme handed him the letter. The Earl read it through twice, and then glanced keenly at the young man.

"So Jordison is alive," he said, "and it was one of his servants who perished in the fire."

"It seems so," Holme replied.

"Do you know Jordison's writing?" Lord Heatherstone asked.

"No," answered Holme frankly, "I do not. This may be the work of some practical joker."

"It can be easily verified," said Lord Heatherstone. "What price does this man expect you to pay? Did you ever meet him before you came across him at the Red House?" And Lord Heatherstone watched Holme's face carefully as he asked the question.

"Never," Holme replied emphatically. "He's a madman, and wishes to know something which I am unable to tell him."

"Then he has no real cause for disliking you?"

"None whatever," Holme replied, but he turned his eyes away from Lord Heatherstone's keen gaze as he answered the question. He knew very well why Jordison disliked him.

The shifting of the eyes did not escape Lord Heatherstone's notice, and he made a mental note that Holme had told him a lie.

"Lord Harry Quy is here," he said after a pause. "He came down last night to see if he could help us in any way. You will, of course, stay the night. We shall be glad of your company, and perhaps between the three of us we may be able to work out some solution of this problem. Ah! here is Harry himself."

Lord Harry Quy came toward them, hesitated a moment, and then shook hands silently with Holme. The two young men had not met for several months. A certain coolness had sprung up between them, in spite of their strenuous efforts to resist any feelings of jealousy. Their correspondence had died down to the exchange of

an occasional formal letter dealing with political matters.

Lord Harry, to whom Lord Heatherstone had unburdened his soul in the first heat of anger against Arthur Holme, felt that his friend had not acted quite honestly toward him. Holme, who had for a long time fought against the dictates of his own heart out of loyalty to his friend, bitterly resented the imputation, which, though it had never been expressed in words, had been made manifest by Lord Harry's manner toward him.

But all the red passions grow pale in the presence of death. The girl they both loved was either dead or else in the hands of a madman, who had hitherto let nothing stand between him and his desires. They were united by a common bond, and resolved to save or avenge her. The bond was sealed in silence by a single clasp of their hands. Its terms were not set forth in words, but it was understood that they worked together without regard to what the future held for either of them.

After dinner they sat that evening over the smoking-room fire and thrashed out the whole question of where it would be best to search for William Jordison. Lord Heatherstone admitted that it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Lord Harry Quy, who had come down from London on a new motor-car of extraordinary power and speed, thought that he would be able to trace Jordison to his hiding-place if he could once get fairly started on a warm trail. Holme, whose ideas were local, thought

that Jordison was in the neighbourhood, and that the letter posted from Up Withing in Yorkshire was a mere blind. He could assign, so he said, no other motive for the writing of such a letter.

The next morning, after an early breakfast at eight o'clock, Lord Harry Quy took Arthur Holme round to the stables to inspect the new motor-car. It had been manufactured by a well-known firm, and had only just been put on the market. It represented the "last word" of the motor world in regard to power and speed.

It was an eight-cylinder car, one hundred and twenty indicated horse power, and had attained at a recent speed trial the terrific pace of ninety-seven miles an hour. It had cost four thousand pounds. In appearance it was long, low hung, wide, and ugly. It had not yet received its final coat of paint and was coloured a dull grey, like a modern battleship.

The luxurious padded seats of the modern car were conspicuous by their absence, for Lord Harry had not yet decided on the type of body. There were only two seats, and these were little more than a framework of steel. The general aspect of the machine was that of the human body, stripped of its flesh, and showing only the bones and muscles.

Arthur Holme looked at the unsightly object in silence. He could not pretend to feel the admiration that Lord Harry Quy expressed in every feature. But he realised that the mere ugliness of the thing spoke well for its serviceable qualities. Evidently no money had been wasted on outward show or decoration.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" said Lord Harry, after looking at it for a minute or two in silent admiration.

"H'm," replied Holme, "how fast do you say?"

"I shall get one hundred miles an hour out of her when her engines settle down a bit."

"Do you think you can beat Jordison's car?"

"I have never seen it, but I reckon this car would walk around any car that was ever made. The sister-car is racing three days from now against some of the finest cars in the world. The makers are betting even money against the field."

Holme looked at it critically. He did not know anything about motor-cars. He could have criticised the lines of a yacht, but this ugly grey lump of machinery was outside his sphere of knowledge. He saw, however, that it might be very useful to him in tracking down Jordison, if it represented all that was claimed for it.

"I tell you what we'll do, Harry," he said after a pause, "if you will consent. We will start in an hour's time for Up Withing in Yorkshire, and see if we can find any trace of Jordison having been there. Then we will come back here and thoroughly examine the whole of Essex. I am still convinced that Jordison is hiding not far from this very house."

"Where do you think he is? Somewhere in the marshes?"

"Yes. It seems ridiculous, doesn't it? The marshes are better adapted for a yacht than a motor-car. But they would offer an excellent place of concealment. For

the most part they are totally uninhabited and almost inaccessible."

Lord Harry smiled. "You forget the motor," he said, "no motor could possibly be hidden in the marshes, for the simple reason that it could not be driven across them. It would have to be concealed somewhere near the road. Every inch of the roads has been searched, and no one has discovered any hiding-place that would conceal a large car like Jordison's."

"You are right, Quy," Holme answered gloomily, "the marshes are out of the question. He must have concealed himself somewhere else in Essex."

"Or in England," Lord Harry replied. "It is, as Lord Heatherstone said last night, like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay. For my own part, I don't think he is in this part of the world at all. It is naturally the last place he would choose for a hiding-place."

"And therefore one that would commend itself to a clever scoundrel," said Holme. "Do you remember Poe's story of the 'Purloined Letter'? It will at any rate be hopeless to search all England."

"A good many people are in the hunt," Quy replied; "ten thousand pounds is a lot of money. I should say that every square mile of the United Kingdom has been searched during the last month or two."

"And yet nothing has been found. The car has only once been seen, and that was on the road at the bottom of the park. The man who saw it was not sober at the time and may have been mistaken. It seems hopeless."

"We are bound to hear something," Lord Harry re-

plied, "and if we do we shall be in a position to follow it up. I wager that if we once catch sight of Mr. Jordison's car we shall overtake it." And he looked admiringly at the one hundred and twenty-horse-power monster before him.

"When will you be ready to start?"

"In about an hour. We had better take a bag with a few things for each of us. There's no knowing when our journey will end."

"No," answered Holme, "nor what we shall find at the end of it. But I will not rest until Jordison is brought to the gallows."

"Nor I," said Lord Harry Quy.

Holme held out his hand, and his friend took it in silence.

At half-past ten in the morning the grey car glided down the drive and into the open country, and before dark it had reached the little village of Up Withing in Yorkshire.

CHAPTER XXIV

WILLIAM LIPP OF UP WITHING

Up Withing stands five hundred feet above the level of the sea in the very heart of the Yorkshire moors. It consists of twoscore cottages, a public-house licensed for beer only, a rectory, a church, and four farmhouses.

The two young men drove slowly up the single street and stopped outside the public-house. The whole village turned out to examine the car, and a crowd of school-children clustered about it like flies round a sugar-basin.

Lord Harry Quy went into the little taproom and was regarded apathetically by three stolid-looking men, each of whom held a quart mug in his horny hand.

"The landlord?" said Quy interrogatively.

One of the men thumped the table with his empty mug, and in a minute the publican appeared. He was short and broad shouldered, with an unintelligent face, which seemed to regard the world with a perpetual scowl. His eyes brightened at the appearance of the newcomer. He had seen the motor and knew that it represented money.

"I and my friend want to stop a night here," Quy said; "have you a room?"

"Noa," said the man, after a pause. "We haven't a room."

"Can you find me one in the village?"

"Dunno. Maybe I can and maybe I can't."

"Jarge could sleep in the stable," said one of the drinkers meditatively.

"Oh, could he?" replied the landlord in a surly voice. "How would you like to sleep in the stable, William Lipp?"

Quy started involuntarily at the name, and glanced swiftly at the man addressed by it. In an instant he saw a possible source of information.

"Perhaps Mr. Lipp has a room?" he said pleasantly.

"Oi've a room," the man chuckled, "an' Oi'll sleep in the kitchen if I've paid for it."

"We'll pay," Quy said, and then, seeing the scowl deepen on the landlord's face, he hastened to add, "I suppose we could get our meals here, and you could put up the motor?"

"It 'd mean turning out our wagon," said the landlord, "and our wagon's just been repainted."

"We will make it worth your while."

"What be doin' in these parts?" the landlord asked suspiciously. Like the rest of England, he had heard of William Jordison, and the idea was forming in his slow brain that possibly the murderer stood before him.

"On the way to Scotland," Quy answered curtly. "Something wrong with the car. It will take us a day to get it right. But give me an answer about accom-

modation. My name is Lord Harry Quy. You needn't be afraid that I'll run off with your spoons."

The magic power of a title made itself manifest in every face. The landlord bowed obsequiously.

"What I can give yer, my lord, is at yer disposal."

"I'll be happy to give yer lordship my room," the yokel chimed in, "but perhaps the rector——"

"Your room will do, Mr. Lipp," Quy broke in curtly.

"Get us a good square meal ready, landlord, we haven't had anything since breakfast." The landlord started to enumerate the contents of his larder, but Quy cut him short, and went outside to rejoin Holme, who was vainly struggling to keep a dozen small boys from touching the machinery of the motor. He briefly told his news. Holme's face flushed with excitement.

"It's a lucky discovery, and may lead to something," he said. "On the other hand, the name may be merely a coincidence, and even if this yokel is some relative of Jordison's servant, we may be able to get nothing out of him. Does he look like a rogue?"

"There he is," said Quy, pointing at the man who was slouching out of the inn to make preparation for the reception of his distinguished guests.

Holme looked at the rugged, inexpressive face and smiled.

"No, he is not a rogue, but dull and unintelligent. Such people are often quite as difficult to get information out of. However, we shall see."

Arthur Holme and Lord Harry Quy slept that night in William Lipp's humble cottage. The bedroom, which

contained one small and one large bed, was redolent of soap and furniture polish. A small fire crackled in the tiny grate, and a bowl of anemones was placed on the table by the window. Before they turned in for the night they searched the room thoroughly, but found nothing.

The next morning they expressed themselves so delighted with their new quarters that they had decided to stay another night.

William Lipp went out to his work at daybreak, and, while the two young men were having breakfast at the inn, an old dame hobbled in from next door and made the bed. By the time they returned she had disappeared, and they had the house to themselves.

They went into the single room, half kitchen, half parlour, where Lipp spent such part of his time as he could spare from his work and the public-house. Then they proceeded to turn the room inside out, making a thorough search for something that would connect the occupant with Jordison's servant. They examined the family Bible, searched every inch of the cupboards, opened every drawer and went through its contents, scrutinised every piece of paper that they could lay their hands on, but they found nothing.

"I've had enough," said Lord Harry Quy, "and I feel pretty mean about all this business. Let's wait and have a talk to the fellow this evening. We'll have in beer, and I expect we'll get something out of him. It's more straightforward, anyhow."

Holme did not reply. He was looking hard at the

fireplace. The fire was laid, but it had not been lit. William Lipp could only afford to use coal on Sundays. The water for his breakfast and tea was boiled in the house next door. Holme looked thoughtfully at the three layers of wood, coal, and paper.

"It's cold," said Lord Harry Quy; "shall we light it?"

For reply Holme walked over to the fireplace, and pulled out a piece of grey paper which projected from the bars of the grate. It was an envelope addressed to Mr. William Lipp, Up Withing, Yorkshire. It bore the postmark of Gorehaven, in Essex. Holme looked inside. It was empty. He handed it to Lord Harry, who gave a low whistle of surprise.

"The scent is getting warm," he said; "we must certainly have in that beer to-night. Do you recognise the handwriting?"

"No," replied Holme, "it is probably that of Jordison's servant. It is the scrawl of an uneducated man. If it is so, we have an important clue to Jordison's whereabouts. This was posted the day after Lady Agnes' disappearance; ergo, Jordison was still in the neighbourhood, and, ergo, his hiding-place is probably not far from Gorehaven."

That evening when William Lipp returned from a wet day's work on the hills, he found the fire lit, a great joint of cold roast beef, a jar of pickles, bread and butter, and a large plum-cake on the table, and two gallons of beer reposing on the stone floor. Lord Harry Quy explained that they did not wish to leave the house

that night, and hoped he would join them in some supper.

By eight o'clock most of the beef had gone, and three-quarters of the beer was drunk. Holme produced his tobacco-pouch, and the three men sat over the fire and smoked. William Lipp, full and satisfied, blinked lazily. He could hardly grasp the situation. He was only sure of one thing: that he had made one of the best meals of his life and that he had washed it down satisfactorily with unlimited beer.

Holme and Quy had no difficulty in obtaining the information they required. They commenced to talk about London, and asked William Lipp if he had ever been there. He thought for some time and replied in the negative. Then Holme asked if he had any relations there, and if so, he ought to go and visit them, &c., &c.

Lipp relapsed into a long train of thought and closed his eyes. Finally he roused himself and admitted that he had a relative, a cousin, to be exact, and that this relative lived, not precisely in London, but in Essex, which was, so to speak, part of London.

Lord Harry Quy questioned him kindly about this relative, and Lipp, inspired by the compliment of so great a personage being interested in his humble belongings and warmed by the food, the fire and the beer, told slowly and with many pauses the story of his cousin's life. How he had been out to the goldfields for seven years, and returned with a comfortable little pile. How he had set up as a green-grocer in Gorehaven, and how he

had generally prospered, and brought the name of Lipp to a high level.

The two young men smiled, but listened attentively to every word with an interest that was not entirely assumed, and at the end of the narrative Holme carelessly asked if Lipp had heard from his relative lately. The rustic took a deep draught of beer, and chuckled.

"Not a week ago," he said; "whoi, he asked I to post two letters for him, and one of 'em to a lady of title; said as 'ow he wanted to play a joke on friends of 'is—lady of title, mark ye—and he said—damn——"

William Lipp rose unsteadily to his feet, and stood with wide-open mouth.

"Well?" said Holme, who was quivering with excitement.

"Whoi, he said as 'ow I warn't to tell anybody about the letters in case Lady—damn——" And the man scratched his head.

In spite of the serious importance of the news, the two young men could not help smiling. Then they adroitly turned the conversation, and in less than a quarter of an hour William Lipp was asleep.

Holme whispered to his friend, and they rose to their feet. Lord Harry slipped two sovereigns into the pocket of the sleeping man and they left the house with the bag that contained their clothes. Then they crossed over to the inn, settled handsomely with the landlord, brought round the motor from the dilapidated coach-house, and in less than half an hour Up Withing lay twenty miles

to the north of them, and they were speeding southward as fast as their car could carry them.

It was still dark when they ran down from the undulating hills of western Essex, into the flat country that stretched eastward to the sea. A thick blanket of mist lay over the marshes, and the powerful lamps of the car showed nothing but a white cloud ahead.

They slackened down to the lowest speed, and though they were now on roads of which every turn and bend was well known to them, they did not dare run at a greater pace than eight miles an hour, a crawl that was only obtained by frequent use of the brake.

Both men were thoroughly tired out, for they had had but one night's sleep in the last three days. Holme sat with his chin sunk on his breast, and only the uncomfortable nature of his seat prevented him from falling asleep.

Lord Harry Quy was forced to keep all his senses on the alert, and his nerves were strung up to such a high pitch that the activity of his brain overcame the physical fatigue of his body. Every now and then he took hold of his companion's arm with his left hand and shook him violently.

At last Holme roused himself. He had nearly fallen off his seat, and he began to be impressed with the danger of his position. He looked at his watch. It was half-past four. Then he stared into the mist, which hung round like a curtain on every side.

"Where are we, Quy?" he said, with a yawn.

"We've just passed the bridge over Trumpion's creek.

I could see nothing, but I felt the rise and fall of the road." Holme looked behind him.

"The fog seems to be lifting," he said, "it looks a bit lighter behind us." Lord Harry Quy gave a hurried look behind him, and then slightly quickened the speed of the car. As he did so the mist turned from darkness into a dull orange, and from orange into several fainter shades of yellow. Then there was the low hissing sound of wheels along the muddy road.

"Take one of the side lamps," Lord Harry Quy called out, "and hold it over the back."

Scarcely had Holme done so when the mist showed like white foam behind them, there was a blinding glare of light in his eyes, something dark swerved suddenly to one side, shot past them, showed for a second in the light of their own lamps, and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

In that brief second Lord Harry Quy had seen a gigantic black car, and two crouching figures masked and covered with black leather from head to foot.

"Jordison!" he said, putting the lever down another inch. "He must be mad to drive like that. He was all but into us, and would have smashed us up if I hadn't thought of that extra lamp."

"If he can drive at that pace," replied Holme quietly, "we can. I'll take the risk."

"And I, too, by gad," said Lord Harry Quy. "It is a straight road." And he moved the lever from speed to speed till the lights of the great car tore like meteors through the darkness.

CHAPTER XXV

THE LONG ROAD

Holme set his face grimly, as the great car shot forward into the fog. The cold, white mist beat into his face like a stream of liquid ice. He gripped the sides of his steel seat with both hands. For the rest he trusted to Providence and the keen eyes and firm hands of Lord Harry Quy.

Holme was not used to motor-cars, and a ride of this sort was calculated to try the nerves of an experienced man. The fog and darkness closed in on him like the walls of a vault. The engine throbbed and beat beneath him like the continual whirr of a loom. The air whistled past his ears like the sharp hiss of a serpent. Behind and on either side lay an impenetrable blackness; before him, a patch of muddy road rushing toward him from a white sea of mist.

Lord Harry Quy drove like a madman, his eyes glued on the brown road and the ridge of grass on either side which marked out his course. He knew the danger that lurked in the darkness but he had no time to think of it. His mind was riveted on a single object, and for that he was prepared to risk everything.

As the minutes passed and the miles flashed by him all mental and physical fatigue vanished. He became

a machine moving relentlessly onward, one with the pulsing shafts and cylinders beneath him—a soulless automaton quickened to life by a single breath—the voice of a dead girl crying out to him to slay and spare not.

Fast as they drove—and Lord Harry got every ounce of power out of his engines—they did not come up to the object of their chase. Every moment they expected to see the lights of Jordison's car, but nothing came to them out of the white mist ahead.

Lord Harry cursed aloud. He began to realise that he was beaten. Since the black car had passed them there had been no turning from the one long straight road. It was quite certain that they had followed the right track. Yet Jordison had eluded them.

Beyond the park wall the main road ran straight on to the ferry across the Yoke Fleet, while a bye-road skirted this wall and formed a connecting link between the old Roman causeway and the London road. It was quite clear that Jordison would not attempt to cross the ferry, and Lord Harry Quy steered by the wall on his right and dashed into the narrow lane.

A shower of mud and stones and a jolt that nearly flung both the men from their seats warned him that he must slow down if he did not wish to rip the tires off the wheels. He reduced the speed to thirty miles an hour.

The road ran slightly uphill, and in less than a minute the car emerged from the carpet of fog that covered the lower ground. The moon was shining brightly overhead in a clear sky. Both men peered eagerly ahead.

At the top of the slope, half a mile away, a bright light flashed for a second and disappeared.

"We're on his heels," said Holme; "can't you go faster?"

"Certainly, but there is the risk of breaking down altogether."

"We must take the risk," Holme replied; "Jordison has taken it."

Lord Harry said nothing, but gradually slipped the car on to the top speed. They could see clearly now, and the chief danger lay in the roughness of the road, which appeared to be made of loose round pebbles and mud. As they shot forward, the stones rattled all around them and the mud spurted up in a continuous stream. The car had as yet no mud-guards fixed onto it. When they reached the top of the hill they saw a light a mile ahead of them.

"He's gaining," muttered Holme.

"He has been going downhill," Lord Harry replied.

"Now, hold tight."

The car shot down the hill like a stone from a sling. Holme's brain was dizzy with the roar and rush of the air that swept past him. He clutched the seat with both hands. He imagined the sensation was like that of falling from a great height. He wondered how his companion could keep his seat and both hands on the steering-wheel.

Then he noticed that Lord Harry Quy had strapped himself in with a broad leather belt. He shuddered to think of what would happen if the car were to overturn.

But his heart was full of gratitude and admiration. His friend was risking his life for the sake of a woman who loved another man.

It was indeed a miracle that the car was not wrecked in that headlong descent, and the successful passage of these two short miles of down gradient would have proved a fine advertisement for any makers in the world. The machine leapt and crashed down the slope like a living thing.

Every now and then it seemed as though all four wheels were off the ground, and that the car was flying through space. Then there would come a grinding crash and shock, and a shower of mud would fly up before them like spray from the bows of a vessel. As luck would have it, the road was now almost free from stones.

But broad though the car was, it rocked from side to side like a ship in a storm, and it seemed to Holme's inexperienced eye as though every swing of its great iron frame would hurl it over on its side into the hedge.

The whole descent occupied less than a minute, but the sensations of an hour were crowded into that brief space of time. Holme gave a sigh of relief as they neared the broad, white stretch of the London road that ran north and south to right angles of them.

The light was still visible to the north and was now less than half a mile ahead. For one brief moment Lord Harry shut off the supply of petrol and applied the brake. They swung round the corner on two wheels and shot out on the smooth surface of the road.

In a few seconds Lord Harry had worked his engines

up to their top speed, and the strain on his eyes and mind was at last in some measure relieved. The moon shone clear on a broad, smooth road, and the speed was terrific. The journey was luxurious compared to what they had just experienced in the fog, and through the morass of that narrow lane.

They could now see the black car itself, and the smell of its petrol came back to them. But Lord Harry marvelled at its silence. The throb of his own engines could be heard at least a mile away. He realised that if once the moon went behind a cloud, and if Jordison cared to risk putting out his lights, they would have nothing to follow but their own instincts, and would have to guess at the probable route Jordison would take.

Lord Harry looked up at the sky. A heavy cloud of white vapour was already near the moon. Then he looked at the car ahead. He was gaining on it, and he wondered if he could reach it before the earth was plunged in darkness. Then suddenly, as though in answer to his thoughts, the lights before him vanished, and he had nothing to follow but the outline of the black car on the white road.

Holme had no doubt that they would overtake Jordison before twenty minutes had elapsed, and he began to ask himself what would happen if they got alongside of him. Both he and Lord Harry were unarmed, and he realised that they had to do with desperate men.

Half a mile away from the parting of the roads they were so close to Jordison's car that they could hear the hissing of the wheels and the sound of voices. A second

later the white strip of road vanished as suddenly as though it had been blotted off the map, and a veil of darkness descended over the whole scene.

Nothing was visible but the fan of yellow light that swept on before them. But they could still hear the sound of wheels on the soft road. It would, however, be impossible to tell whether Jordison had taken the right or left turning until they had shot well past the sign-post. And a wrong turning at this point would mean the loss of at least a mile in the chase.

Lord Harry Quy peered ahead, but could see nothing. Their own lamps illuminated the road for nearly fifty yards in front of them, but beyond that all was darkness.

"Which is it to be," he said quickly, "the right or left?"

For answer Holme took a coin from his pocket and held it between his open palms.

"Heads right, tails left," he said.

"Very well," Lord Harry replied; "it is just as good a way as any other." Holme exposed the coin, and held it down to one of the side-lamps.

"Heads," he said, and replaced the coin in his pocket.

Lord Harry took the car to the right of the road, and a few seconds later the white sign-post flashed up like a ghost on their left and vanished.

It was an anxious moment. Both men listened attentively. Then Lord Harry burst out with a "Thank God." The faint noise in front of them continued. Fortune had been with them in this one thing, at any

"We shall overtake it now," said Lord Harry; "there is not another break in the road for ten miles, and then he dare not take it. He would have to slow down to take a right-angle turn. For thirty miles he will have to go straight ahead on the north road."

"And what do we do when we overtake it?" asked Holme.

"We go alongside and talk."

"I'm afraid Jordison won't waste words on us," he said dryly, "and I don't think that it would be advisable to get too close to him. We had better hang on his heels till daylight and give the alarm. The news will be all over England in an hour and he cannot possibly escape."

"You are probably right," Lord Harry answered, "but I intend to have a go at him myself. I wish to meet the gentleman."

"Few that have met him wish to do so again," Holme replied, and the two men relapsed into silence.

The two cars tore on through the night. The hedges ran past in streaming lines of brown, and the road spun toward them like a strip of paper from a tape-machine. Jordison relit his lamps and the glow of them ran before the pursuers like a cloud of fire.

Up gentle slopes and down long gradients and over wide stretches of level ground they rushed at the same headlong speed. Sleeping villages burst into sight and vanished like scenes that are disclosed from darkness by a flash of lightning. And inch by inch the grey car crept up to the object of its pursuit, till at last a black mass of metal crept out of the darkness into the edge of

the broad fan of light that streamed from the Bleriot lamps.

"It's a long road," said Lord Harry Quy, "but the end of it is in sight."

Farther and still farther the black car crept into the light. The two young men could now see the backs of the occupants. A tall man had his hands on the steering-gear, and a small squat figure looked back at them. They could see his face, white in the glare of the lamps, coarse featured, and evil.

"Lipp," said Holme, as though in answer to a silent query on the part of his companion; "we've a tough couple to deal with, Quy. I wish I had my revolver. It's the devil's own luck that I left it in Up Withing, when we went off in such a hurry."

"You've two hands," cried Lord Harry, "and I wouldn't care to have my throat in your fingers."

Holme smiled. Lord Harry had not been in the clutches of William Jordison.

Then suddenly the squat figure turned right round and flung his arm over the back of the car. A second later there was a flash and a report, and a bullet sang past Lord Harry's ear.

He laughed. He was strung up to so high a pitch of excitement that he would have faced a Maxim gun without fear.

There was another flash and yet another, and two bullets in quick succession struck the ground in front of the car. Lord Harry laughed again—the aim was so palpably ridiculous. He chuckled to see his oppo-

nents fling away their ammunition on an invulnerable road.

There was another flash and a metallic ring as the bullet struck the honeycombing in front of the bonnet. The cars were now a bare twenty yards apart.

"Keep back," cried Holme, "we can hang on their heels all right till daylight."

"Keep back be damned!" said Lord Harry; "they can't shoot straight. I will run their cursed car down in two minutes."

Holme watched Lipp refill his revolver and take careful aim over the back of the car, and he noticed that the barrel of the revolver pointed downward. Then there came four flashes, one after the other, as quick as a man can count. Two struck the road, one hit the hub of the right-hand wheel, and the fourth found its mark. It struck the tire with a dull thud and hiss of air.

The car sank slowly over and wrenched the wheel out of Lord Harry's hand. The next instant the tire was ripped off the wheel like a piece of paper. The great car swerved to the right, and a ton of metal came full tilt into a tree.

Holme was flung from his seat in a crumpled ball and shot like a bullet into the hedge. Lord Harry Quy, still strapped to his seat, was crushed against the tree like a fly on a wall. In a second of time he had traversed a longer road than any marked on the map of England, and had found the end of it.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TOMB

When Holme came to his senses and opened his eyes, he was in darkness. He sat up and tried to collect his thoughts. At first he could not remember what had happened, then he recollected the long chase through the night, the swerve of the car, the crash, and after that nothing more.

He had a confused idea in his brain that he was still lying where he had fallen, and that the blackness around him was that of night, but, as his mind grew clearer, he realised that no night was ever so dark as this.

Then the awful thought burst upon him that he had been blinded by the accident. He felt in his pocket for some matches, but could not find the box. Then he touched the ground by his side. It did not feel to him like the road. It was hard, smooth and cold like solid rock.

It was inconceivable that he should have fallen on such a place and escaped with his life. He could not imagine where he had been taken to, but he guessed that Jordison had some hand in the matter.

With the idea of blindness uppermost in his mind, he unlaced one of his heavy nailed boots, and taking it

in his hand struck the rocky floor several times with all his strength. Two or three sparks flashed out from the impact, and never had such small sparks of light meant so much to a man. He shouted with joy, and the noise reverberated like distant thunder, till it died away in a whisper. He thrust his foot back into the boot and laced it up carefully.

He realised now that he was in some subterranean cavern or passage, and a new terror seized him. Was it possible that Jordison had thrown him into some underground prison, which was destined to be his tomb? He pictured to himself a lingering death from thirst and starvation, with never a glimmer of light to cheer his last moments, and with never a sound to break the silence but the dying gasps of his own breath.

Then he cursed himself for a coward and rose to his feet. He shook off the cloud that the darkness had woven about his brain, and his mind once more became keen and vigorous, the mind of a man who is in a tight place, and who has to exert all his energies to get out of it.

He stepped cautiously forward, for he knew not what lay before him. It was possible that a precipice might suddenly fall away beneath his feet. He moved several yards in one direction and encountered nothing. Then he turned to the right, and a few steps brought him up against a dead wall.

He turned sharply round and retraced his steps, counting them as he walked. When he had taken eight paces he encountered another wall. Keeping one hand

on the stone, he moved along it, expecting every minute to again meet some further obstacle to his progress. But when he had walked for a few minutes he came to the conclusion that he was in a long passage.

He quickly obtained confirmation of this, by leaving the wall once more and crossing over to the other side, now some ten paces distant. He resolved to explore the passage from end to end, and continued in the same direction.

In an hour's time he stepped into some water. He thought at first that it might be a mere puddle, but, when he tried to skirt it, he found that it reached to the opposite wall. He placed his hand against the rock and splashed cautiously forward. The cold water rose to his ankles, and as he proceeded grew deeper and deeper till it reached his knees.

Then he stopped, felt once more in his pockets for the matches which he always carried with him, and searched every inch of the lining carefully for a single match, which is often to be found about the clothes of a confirmed smoker. But he was unsuccessful.

Matches are cheap enough in England, but at that moment he would have given half of all his worldly goods for a single box of them. The darkness was becoming heavy, and suffocating like the folds of a velvet pall. He was more hopelessly lost in it than a sailor who tries to pick his way through an unknown and unlighted channel in a fog. Only the stone of the passage and the cold water were realities.

He moved forward another few yards and the water

reached his coat. It had begun to deepen more rapidly. His feet no longer touched the hard rock, but sank into a soft bed of mud or sand.

An idea suddenly seized him. He gathered up some of the water in his hands and lapped a few drops with his tongue. The water was salt. He turned round, and retracing his steps, came back to the dry ground. Then he sat down in his dripping clothes and reasoned things out.

It was clear that this unknown tunnel was connected in some way or other with one of the creeks, or even with the sea. It was possible that the pool was merely an accumulation of salt water which had filtered through the rock and earth above, but on the other hand it was conceivable that the tunnel emerged in the sea. If so, there was a chance that the opening was uncovered at low tide.

Holme had no means of ascertaining the state of the tide at that particular moment, for he had no idea of the time and did not even know whether it was day or night. It would, however, be easy to find out whether the water was tidal, and if so, whether the tide was rising or falling.

He went down to the pool, and placing a shilling on the very edge of the water, waited patiently for the information he required. In a few minutes' time he found that the water had receded from the coin. It was clear that the pool was tidal, and that the tide was running out.

But it was just possible that the tide had neared its

lowest point and that it would only fall a few inches more. In which case there was no hope of an exit into the open air.

He carefully felt the ground running from the water's edge into the tunnel behind him. For three yards it was wet, and then his fingers encountered dry rock. The distance represented, as far as he could judge, a fall of about six inches in the water.

It was, therefore, evident that the tide had only just turned. With twelve or fifteen feet to fall it was possible that the mouth of the tunnel might be completely uncovered. He stooped down and peering across the water into the darkness, waited for some glimmer of light, the first indication of escape from this tomb of rock.

When he had waited an hour, shivering, hungry, and tormented with thirst, it suddenly occurred to him that there might be a bend in the tunnel, which would absorb the first weak rays of the sun, filtering through a mass of green water.

He moved several yards forward to the water's edge, but still there was darkness. Then it occurred to him that it might possibly be night, and that there would be no light to guide him. He debated with himself whether after all it would not be better to take off his clothes, plunge boldly into the water and swim as far as the roof of the tunnel would permit.

When another hour had passed, and still no glimmer of light came from the black wall of darkness, he decided to take this somewhat desperate course. He took off

all his clothes and walked into the icy water till it reached his waist. Then he struck out boldly.

Yet, as he started, the thought came to him that Jordison had brought him to this place, that Jordison had left him unfettered and free to roam where he pleased, and that it was hardly likely that Jordison had left him any loophole for escape.

Holme was a powerful swimmer and he had no fears for his own safety so long as nothing out of the way interrupted his progress. But it was strange work swimming there in the darkness, hearing the hollow splash of his steady strokes, and bumping against the wet rocks that closed him in on either side. When he had gone a hundred yards he tried to touch the bottom, but found that he was out of his depth.

Raising his hand above his head, he touched the roof, and the impact sent him under for a few seconds. After another hundred yards he again lifted his arm, but found that the roof was no closer to him. At the end of another hundred yards he could not touch it, and sinking suddenly down reached the sand at the bottom.

Then all at once out of the darkness came a far off gleam of light, no more than a patch of dark bluish grey against an inky background, but still the first ray from the outer world. He swam more quickly and powerfully, and the water bubbled against his head as it bubbles at the bow of a boat.

In a few minutes' time the patch became lighter and more definite in shape. In the joy of his discovery he did not notice the fine network of lines that crossed it.

His head was half buried in the water, and he drove his body forward with long powerful strokes.

Then, as he lifted his arm out of the water to make a stroke, his fingers rapped hard against something, slid past it to his elbow, and his whole body came crash against a framework of iron.

He raised his other hand, and catching hold of a stout bar, examined the obstacle which had brought his progress to such an abrupt termination. As far as he could see in the darkness, which could only have been regarded as twilight by one who had grown accustomed to the absolute blackness of the tunnel, he was confronted by a great screen, made of thick bars of iron, crossed at right angles, and resembling in some measure an ancient portcullis.

He went over it carefully with his numbed fingers and found that the horizontal and transverse bars were firmly riveted together. He also discovered that it had hinges on one side, and that on the other side it was fastened to the rock by a massive chain secured with a padlock. It was, in short, a gate, and its presence seemed to imply that the passage was used as a means of egress and ingress, and that for some reason or other the people who used it were anxious to make their underground residence into a fortress.

He realised now that he had found Jordison's hiding-place, but he could not as yet see how this exit could be of any possible use to a motor-car.

Fifty yards away from him an arch of grey showed against the blackness of the tunnel. A single star

twinkled between the roof and the water, and far off he could see the moving lights of a ship. He resolved to wait till daylight.

And, as he waited, he realised Jordison's cruelty to the full. The man had purposely left him unfettered in the darkness so that he could make this effort to escape, and find, after all his sufferings and exertions, this last impregnable barrier between him and liberty.

In half an hour's time he could touch the bottom and stand with his head above water. His naked and shivering body was now almost lifeless with the cold, and he set to work to warm himself. At first he splashed and kicked vigorously in the water. Then, as the tide receded still farther, he swung his arms to and fro across his chest as cabmen do on a wintry day in London, and danced up and down on the sandy bottom.

He knew that he must keep moving, and although he was almost exhausted with hunger and thirst and fatigue, he never rested for a minute in his exertions to keep the blood circulating in his half-frozen body.

At last the tide ran out from the tunnel, and the arch of sky began to fade into a lighter shade of grey. Then a faint tinge of yellow appeared at the base of it, rising and rising till it became an arch of gold. Then the burning rim of the sun appeared, and a few minutes later the glory of it poured into the narrow tunnel, and turned the dark walls into a splendour of wet and sparkling rock, blazing with a myriad points of light.

At that moment Holme realised that the sun-worshippers had a very solid truth at the root of their su-

perstitious reverence. The rising sun, seen large through the morning mists and almost filling the mouth of the tunnel with its glowing sphere, seemed indeed a thing to be worshipped and adored.

It was, however, no time for regarding the dawn in any spirit of sentiment. Holme first turned his attention to the great iron gate now standing out firm and definite against the light. He examined it quickly and carefully, his eyes searching keenly for some weak spot in chain or bar. But it was as strong as the gate of a mediæval castle.

The bars had apparently been fastened together with steel screws, and the heads of the screws had been cut off. He shook the gate with all his strength, till his whole body glowed with the exertion. The chain that secured it to the wall gave two or three inches each way, and the tunnel resounded with the clash and rattle of the steel links.

But Holme saw at a glance that it would be almost impossible to loosen or break anything. The chain would have held a hundred-ton boat to her moorings. The padlock was enormous, of solid steel, and fitted with a patent lock. The staples and the hinges were cemented into the rock on either side, and were as firm as the rock itself.

Then his eyes travelled to the top of the gate. It had been impossible to run it quite flush with the uneven surface of the rock, but at no part was there a gap of more than six inches in depth. The bottom of the framework was covered with half an inch of sand.

Holme sank on his knees and scraped a hole under the lowest bar. At the depth of about four inches he came down to the solid rock. He rose to his feet and realised that it would be impossible for him to break through the gate unless he could obtain help from the other side.

He stared at the broad expanse of gold across the sea, and tried to find out whereabouts he was on the coast. He knew that he was looking almost due east, for he had seen the sun rise. Eight or nine miles away on the horizon, two ships, one a brig and the other a small steamer, were moving northward.

There was no land in sight, and his keen eyes, trained to observe details that escape the eye of a landsman, could not detect a single boat on the whole expanse of smooth waters. But he noticed that the tide was running out with incredible swiftness, and that already the sea was nearly a quarter of a mile from the mouth of the tunnel, while even farther out bare ridges and islands of sand were rising from the surrounding water.

Holme ransacked his memory for some clue to the locality of the scene. He was thoroughly acquainted with the coast, as viewed from the deck of a boat, and the turns and depths of every creek and channel were completely charted out in his mind. But he guessed that these shallow flats lay far inside safe water, even for so small a vessel as the *Rover*, and that probably he had passed no nearer to them than the vessels he saw on the horizon.

He knew, however, that he looked east, and that the

traffic went north and south. It was also quite clear that his back was to the land, and that he was, therefore, on the east coast.

Then he suddenly realised where he was, and cursed himself for a fool for not having grasped the fact before. The rock that surrounded him afforded the clue. Rock was scarce on that coast of marsh-land and sand-banks. But a few pieces of it were scattered about in one particular district, mere islands of stone that some great upheaval had thrust up from the earth and sand around them.

The Red House had been built on one of these, and all the others were within a radius of ten miles. This was probably one of the Triplets, three small patches of firm land, a quarter of a mile from a large tract of marsh, and set right on the edge of the Great East Ray flats.

His heart sank within him as he realised his position. No big vessels ever crossed these shallow and dangerous waters, and no fishermen ever set their nets or lines on the barren ground. At low tide no man ever put foot on the sands, for between the island and the shore lay a line of quicksands, broad and deep enough to have engulfed an army corps.

He shuddered, and turning away from the sand, retraced his steps up the tunnel to find his clothes and cover his shivering body. As he receded from the entrance, the day passed into twilight, and his own dark shadow blended more and more with the surrounding greyness.

When at last he came to the place where he had left

his clothes, he found, to his surprise, that they had vanished. The shilling still lay on the rock where he had placed and forgotten it.

He moved a few yards farther up the passage, searching every inch of the ground for some trace of his garments. Then suddenly a long white object shimmered before him in the half light.

He stooped down and touched some soft material. Then he grasped it and drew it up to him, foot by foot. It was a large white sheet, thick and warm to the touch. Underneath it lay a long black box. He kicked it with his foot, and it rang out hollow. Then he examined it closely, and gave a cry of horror as he realised the shape of it.

It was a roughly made coffin, and the square piece of material which he held in his hands was doubtless intended as a winding-sheet.

Then he burst into a peal of laughter. He thought that the keen wits of a sane man ought surely to prevail over the maniac mind that had conceived so gruesome a jest as this.

CHAPTER XXVII

JORDISON'S RETREAT

Holme wrapped the thick sheet twice round him, so that the edge of it hung clear from the ground, and rent two holes in it, through which he passed his bare arms. It was a ridiculous and insufficient covering, but it was warm and grateful to a man whose shivering body had been exposed for hours to the cold air and water. Its chief failing as a garment was its insecurity. This could have been remedied by half a dozen safety-pins, but as these were not forthcoming, the wearer had to hold the folds round his body with one hand.

Thus attired, in a costume which would have been ludicrous under more pleasing circumstances, Holme set out to explore the tunnel in the other direction, and see whether the opposite end was as completely guarded as that which ran into the sea.

He had but small hopes for the result of his investigation. Jordison's plans for his death were quite clear to him, and the knowledge was accentuated by the sorry jest of the coffin and the winding-sheet. He was evidently destined to perish slowly of thirst and cold and starvation, in a tunnel of rock, securely sealed at either end.

But the young man's spirits, which had been almost

extinguished by the cold water and the final barrier that had crossed his road to freedom, were rekindled by the comparative warmth of his covering.

The first shock of the coffin and the shroud had been horrible, dealt, as it had been, in the semidarkness and loneliness of the tunnel, and it had certainly been conceived and carried out with the sole object of frightening the unfortunate prisoner.

But Jordison had underestimated the strength of Holme's mind, and was ignorant of its keen sense of humour, a sense that could extract a certain grim amusement from the most dismal circumstances.

It was undoubtedly this sense of the ridiculous that saved the young man's mind from breaking down at this critical moment. Where others might have only seen the horror of the winding-sheet, he could not help wondering how he looked in his strange garments, and the possible grotesqueness of his appearance appealed to his risible faculties. As to the coffin, he was already turning over in his mind how he could make use of it to his own advantage.

The real horror of the situation lay in the pangs of thirst and hunger, which were now furiously attacking his exhausted frame. There were at present no means of combating these ferocious adversaries, and no strength of mind could meet them with any chance of success. Holme could fight with fear, but not with his own physical necessities.

However, he tried to thrust aside all thought of his sufferings, and moved swiftly away from the sea, keeping

one hand on the rocky wall beside him. As he proceeded into the recesses of the tunnel, the twilight died away into darkness, and a last faint patch of light, seen far off like the gleam of a star, was finally hidden round a bend in the passage.

He counted his steps carefully as he walked, and tried to make every pace a yard in length. He could not afford to neglect the smallest and least likely source of information. When he had traversed about three miles, as near as he could judge, his bare foot struck something hard and there was a clink on the stone floor.

He stooped down and groped about in the darkness till his hand encountered a small jug. He had overturned it, and the rock was wet with some liquid. He dabbed his finger on the damp stone and raised it to his mouth. Then he flung himself down and licked every inch of the rock.

The jug had been filled with fresh water. A spoonful of it had collected in a small crevice, and he tore his tongue in his efforts to extract it. This was doubtless another of Jordison's pleasantries.

A hundred yards farther on he stepped on some round objects, that gave and cracked beneath his foot. He stooped down again and thrust his fingers into a sticky mass, full of sharp thin flakes. He tasted it, and smacked his lips. He had crushed two or three eggs into a pulp.

Feeling carefully around him in the darkness, he came across a whole one. He broke off the top and swallowed the contents. It was a strong-flavoured egg

—probably that of a wild duck, and not too fresh—but it seemed very good to the starving man.

When he had drained it to the last drop, and sucked the broken pieces of the shell, he scooped up all he could get from the floor and enjoyed even that. It was no time for nice feeding. Of a truth this Jordison was a merry fellow and full of devices.

This scanty meal and the few drops of water he had managed to gather from the rocky floor put fresh life into his body, and he moved forward more rapidly. But it seemed as if the tunnel would never cease, and it was not till he had walked steadily for another hour and a half that he saw the first sign of some termination to his journey.

All at once the veil of darkness was pierced by a pin-hole of light, a mere speck, so minute that Holme at first thought it merely a creation of his own brain—one of those points of light that cross a man's eye in the darkness. But this one did not move, and the steadiness of it proclaimed its reality. He did not dare hope that it was daylight. But at least the glimmer of it offered some relief from the darkness.

As he walked on, it grew larger and larger, and then became definite in shape—a small square of yellow, like the light of a lamp seen through a tiny window. Then there came to his ears the distant murmur of voices, and then to his nostrils the glorious smell of hot meat, wafted toward him like a breath of life, sweet, luscious, and alluring beyond any temptation devised by Satan in this world.

He crept nearer and nearer to the light, moving cautiously so as not to attract the attention of the speakers. The conversation grew more and more distinct, and soon he recognised Jordison's voice.

At last he came to the end of his journey and his fingers traced out a massive doorway of wood, barred and clamped with iron. Ten feet to his right, and on a level with his chin, there was a hole about nine inches square, and a long shaft of yellow light streamed out from it into the darkness of the tunnel.

Holme sidled quietly along the door till he reached the aperture. Then he peered cautiously round the edge of it, well aware that he was bound to be seen if any one inside happened to be looking in that direction.

But, as luck would have it, the only two occupants of the vast cavern that opened out before his astonished eyes were sitting with their backs to the door. The place that William Jordison had chosen for his subterranean house was, indeed, princely in its proportions. It was lit with a dozen oil-lamps, yet these did no more than make the darkness visible. The roof was hidden in a cloud of impenetrable gloom. Deep shadows lay on distant parts of the floor.

The voices of the two men reverberated from wall to wall of the apartment, and gave some idea of its enormous size. The furniture that Jordison had brought down with him from his residence above ground looked as though it had been taken from a doll's house. The carpets, eighteen and twenty feet square, spread here and there over the floor, looked like little hearth-rugs.

The two men sitting before a large fire of crackling logs were no bigger than the forest pygmies of Central Africa. And over everything hung a gauzy veil of smoke that magnified heights and distances and lent an air of mystery to the most commonplace objects.

Over the fire hung a great steaming kettle, and to Holme's sensitive nostrils the whole place smelt like a kitchen. He saw at a glance that the two men were Lipp and Jordison. Scraps of their conversation came to his ears, and only the echo of the cavern prevented him from hearing every word they uttered.

"'E'd ought to be fast this time—I reckon he's cold—may his soul and body rot—that coffin, it makes me laugh—we fair busted their old machine—he'll speak now, I guess—eh? Dead? Not much. He'll take a lot of killing—Oh, yes, she's safe enough—reckon he ought to be turnin' up soon—lor', 'ow I shall laugh, guv'nor," and so on and so on.

Holme listened in silence with parted lips, and his whole body trembled with excitement. The callous cynicism of Jordison, and the rough brutality of his servant left no impression on a mind that had been hardened by more material evils than coarse language. But he had caught a few sentences, bearing unmistakable reference to Lady Agnes Cliffe, and he gathered that she was still alive and confined, like himself, in the recesses of these subterranean caves and passages.

The knowledge filled him with a twofold responsibility. His own life was doubly precious, and he resolved to guard it carefully. For on it depended the

safety and freedom of one for whom he would have gladly laid it down, if it had been so required.

He hesitated whether to reveal his presence or lie hidden till the men had disappeared and he could make some effort to break through the door. He had as yet formulated no clear plan of escape, even if he succeeded in gaining an entrance into the cavern. The presence of Lady Agnes would make matters doubly difficult, for she, at any rate, had to be saved, even if he lost his own life in the attempt.

The question was decided for him. Lipp made some coarse jest about Lady Agnes, and every word came clear to the listener's ears. Jordison laughed, and replied in the same strain. In an instant Holme's blood boiled with fury, the yellow light became a mist of blood, and he flung all caution to the winds.

Thrusting one bare arm and clenched fist through the opening, he yelled out the single word, "Liar," and the sound of it echoed and reverberated through the cavern like the shriek of winds. Lipp and Jordison both sprang to their feet and turned toward him. Then seeing the bare muscular arm extended toward them, they both laughed and came over to the door.

"Ain't 'e 'evingly?" said Lipp, with a broad grin.

"Not yet," replied Jordison, with a quiet sneer, "but he will be presently. At least, we hope so, if he has lived a virtuous life—good-morning, Mr. Holme. I trust you have had a pleasant night?"

Holme did not answer, but drew back his arm and glared through the tiny opening in the door. He read

his fate in the two faces that grinned back at him, the one bestial and repulsive, the other keen, gaunt and wild, with the light of madness glinting in the dark eyes.

Jordison advanced, and struck him in the face with his fingers.

"Get back, you dog," he cried savagely.

Holme reeled back, smarting under the blow. But he had made up his mind to be calm and conciliatory for the sake of the life that was so dear to him.

"Give me food and water," he cried, "for pity's sake."

"O! that's your song, is it?" Jordison replied. "It's a tune we shall have to get accustomed to, eh, Lipp? But we won't be too hard on him the first day, eh, Lipp? Is the dinner ready?"

The servant went back to the steaming pot, and, fishing out a piece of meat, thrust it into his mouth.

"It's good," he cried out.

"Lay the table over here," Jordison called back; "we don't want to seem unsociable, and tell Lady Agnes that breakfast is ready."

Lipp brought forward a small square table, set it down within a yard of the door, and proceeded to lay it carefully. Then he crossed the cavern and disappeared. In two minutes' time he returned, and Lady Agnes Cliffe walked by his side. Her face was very white, and the dark rings under her eyes spoke of long hours of suffering and sleepless nights. As she came into view Holme cast one fierce hungry look at her and withdrew his face from the opening.

Jordison and Lady Agnes took their seats at the table, and Lipp brought forward the hot stew from the fire and placed portions of it on their plates. He did not sit down himself, but took a large allowance of the food to a distant corner of the cavern.

During the meal Holme crouched silently against the door. He listened to the clink of knives and forks, and the hot scent of the meat was agony to the starving man. Jordison endeavoured to lend point to the situation by praising the victuals and making eulogistic remarks about the wine. At the end of the meal he raised his glass to his lips.

"A toast," he cried suddenly: "long life to Mr. Arthur Holme!"

Lady Agnes Cliffe flushed, but for all that she raised her own glass to her lips and breathed a silent prayer, and it was at that moment that she caught sight of Holme's face at the window. He had decided to reveal himself in case she might be able to release him from his prison. She gave a cry of horror and started to her feet. Jordison laughed merrily.

"Why, there is Mr. Holme," he said, in a mocking voice. "How well he looks, seeing that he has not had anything to eat or drink for two days. I wish we could have asked him to join us, but it is, I am afraid, impossible. Long life to Mr. Arthur Holme!"

Then a tender and delicately nurtured girl did a strange thing. She leant over the table and struck Jordison a blow in the face with all her strength. Before he could recover from his surprise she had plunged her

hand into the hot mass of meat and thrust a few fragments of it through the hole in the door. Then she seized the half bottle of wine, but Jordison caught her wrist and pulled her back on the table with a crash.

"How pretty," he said with a sneer. "I am afraid, Lady Agnes, I must ask Lipp to conduct you back to your apartment. Mr. Holme is starving, and so much meat is not good for a starving man."

"You lie!" yelled Holme. "I am as well fed as you, and I could not drink any more if I wanted to." Then he wrenched at the door and beat against the panels with his bare fists till the whole woodwork shook and rattled and the cavern resounded with the noise of his blows. Lipp came from his corner and led Lady Agnes away without any ceremony and Holme and Jordison were alone. The latter came close to the door and lighting a cigar smiled at the white face at the window.

"Well, Mr. Holme, I think you are fast this time."

"Where's Lord Harry Quy?" Holme asked abruptly.

"You will join him presently," answered Jordison with a grim smile, and then Holme knew that Lord Harry Quy was dead.

CHAPTER XXVIII

JORDISON LEARNS THE TRUTH AT LAST

All through that day Holme crouched against the massive door and waited to lay hold of such opportunities as chance might be pleased to throw to him. But hour after hour passed, and not a single ray of light broke in upon his mental darkness. His fingers went over the door a hundred times until the position of every nail and screw and clamp was photographed clearly in his mind.

He measured the thickness of the wood at the opening, and found that the door was made of two and a half inches of solid timber. He tried to ascertain how it was secured, but all the bolts and fastenings were on the other side. He only gathered one thing, however, from his investigations, namely, that it would be impossible to break it open without tools of some sort. A file, a chisel, a knife, even a steel nail, or a bit of broken pottery would have given him a minute chance of success.

Hours of patient and undisturbed work with an instrument of this sort would perhaps have enabled him to loosen the hinges in the wall, or cut through the planks by the bolts. But he had nothing save his bare fingers and the task was hopeless.

He saw nothing more of Lady Agnes Cliffe. She represented his only hope of escape, and it was quite certain that the two men would not allow her the smallest opportunity of giving him any assistance. She was doubtless securely confined in some other part of the cavern.

The thought of her in some measure turned Holme's mind from his own personal suffering, but only by the painful process of substituting mental for physical agony. Perhaps she, too, was destined to die. Perhaps a worse fate was in store for her. He shuddered to think what a delicate-minded girl like Lady Agnes Cliffe might suffer at the hands of two such brutal ruffians as Lipp and Jordison.

The two men were in the cavern most of the day, but neither of them came near him, and they removed their table to the fireside, where they conversed in whispers. Holme watched them feed with hungry eyes, and the smell of their food nearly drove the starving man to madness. They paid no attention to him, as he peered through the little hole. They seemed to have forgotten his existence.

The young man fully expected a further cross-examination by Jordison, and a promise of release in return for the information Jordison desired. He had already made up his mind to give way on this, if his submission would insure the safety of the woman he loved. But Jordison did not give him the chance; and as he had decided that his confession should only be a last resource, he held his peace.

Shortly after midday, as far as he could judge in a place where it was always night, he heard Lipp and Jordison busily tinkering with something against the wall in which the door was set, but he could not see what they were doing.

An hour later a great black body slid out into the centre of the hall, and for the first time Holme had a clear and uninterrupted view of the famous black car. Something had been wrong with it on the night of the chase, and it was evident that Jordison was putting it in thorough order. He drove it several times around the cavern, steering with wonderful skill and accuracy. Then he came to a stop and discussed its merits with Lipp.

What struck Holme most forcibly about the business was the utter contempt with which they treated him. They were not afraid to reveal their secrets to him. They talked loudly about the car, and Jordison laid bare almost all the secrets of its construction.

He further disclosed how they had made use of the passage leading to the Great East Ray quicksands, spoke of how they had spent two months in making a hard way over them to the shore, where a small lane ran down to the edge of the sands, told how they had filled up the quaking surface of the ground with rock taken from the mouth of the tunnel, and how this hard way, covered by the tide with sand, had escaped the notice of the searchers.

As they conversed, Holme realised that they were talking for his benefit. It was quite clear that they did

not wish to conceal anything from him, equally clear that he did not count, that he was already regarded as a dead man. When they had finished their conversation the two men crossed the cavern and disappeared.

Toward evening Jordison came to the door and threw two small crusts of bread through the aperture. Holme gnawed them like a wild beast, though he knew that they were intended only to prolong the agony of starvation.

An hour later all the lights were extinguished in the cavern, and only the red embers of the fire glowed in the darkness. At last these died out, and Holme realised how much the light meant to him. He even missed the presence of his enemies, the sound of a human voice and the sight of a human form. Anything was better than the silence and the loneliness and the gloom of the subterranean world.

Thoroughly exhausted in body and mind, he slept for a few hours, and awoke once more in darkness. He had been dreaming of the sunlight and the sea, and the white foam before the bows of the *Rover*. The blackness suffocated him and he longed for a breath of fresh air and a glimpse of daylight. He rose to his feet, and made his way once more down the tunnel till he reached the water's edge. The tide was still between the bars of the gate. There he waited till the day broke, and the sun streamed in upon him.

He walked back into the tunnel and began to break the coffin into pieces. He tore off the boards one by one and broke each of them in half under his foot.

Then, searching in the sand, he found an oyster-shell, and with this rude pen he scratched a message on each piece of wood.

“Come to Triplets at once. Two lives in danger.
“ARTHUR HOLME.”

Then he cast them as far as he could into the water, and prayed that at least one of them might float ashore into human hands.

This done, he returned slowly through all the weary length of the tunnel and crouched once more against the door which separated him from the cavern. Another day passed and still he caught no glimpse of Lady Agnes Cliffe, and still neither of the men paid any attention to him. Once or twice he called out to them, but they did not even turn their heads.

Toward nightfall Jordison again passed two small crusts of bread through the window. Holme found that a small tin half full of water had been placed inside the door. That night he again went down to the other end, and all through the day, so long as the tide was out, he sat close to the iron bars and looked across the sea, waiting in vain for some boat to appear on the lonely waters.

When he returned to the cavern end he found his clothes and boots lying in a heap against the door. He put them on and felt more like a man. He also found the daily crusts of bread and another wineglassful of water in a tin.

And so he dragged out a terrible existence for four

days, and then all at once his senses left him, and he collapsed into a crumpled heap on the rocky floor.

Before Jordison retired to rest that night he sat alone before the dying embers of the fire with his elbows on his knees and his gaunt face between his hands. His eyes glittered strangely, and his head, thrust out of the shadow of the cavern, and illuminated by the red light, seemed like that of some lost soul emerging from the outer darkness into the fires of hell.

And there in the red glow of the logs he saw the record of his own life. First, the bright flames of youth and ambition, then the roaring furnace of love and shame and degradation, then the steady heat of undying revenge, lit with a white hot flame, and now the flickering of fires that had been nearly burnt out, and the red-hot ashes that would soon be cold and grey.

The whole history of his life passed before his eyes, and in the darkness of his subterranean refuge he could not find any distraction from the memories of the past.

During the last few months the danger and excitement of existence had allowed him but little time to think. His mind, unhinged by suffering and resentment of the wrongs he had endured, had found relief in wild excess and the pursuit of an inexorable revenge.

His revenge was nearly complete. He had found Marie de la Mothe, and he had found Arthur Sterious, the man who had killed his son. The latter was suffering the agonies of a living death within a few yards of him. The former was always within his reach, drag-

ging out a horrible existence, with the fear of him ever at her heart, only waiting for him to strike the final blow.

Lord Overcliffe was dead, and even Lady Agnes Cliffe had not escaped him. He had resolved that she, too, should die, and that Lord Heatherstone should be the last victim. His scheme of revenge had included both the innocent and the guilty. He had decided that the whole of the cursed house that had allied themselves to Marie de la Mothe should share in her destruction.

Yet on this night as he watched the red-hot wood and listened to the tiny cracks and clicks that came from it, his mind seemed to have sunk into a deep gloom, and the fury that had given strength of purpose to his life had ebbed, and left his thoughts on a darkened shore haunted with ghosts of bygone years.

His struggles as an ambitious young bank clerk, the days of his courtship and his marriage, the prattling voice of his son, the temptation and the downfall, his dead wife, the hell of the convict prison, the busy days in France, when he reconstructed a fortune from nothing, the search for the woman who had wronged him, and the son whom he loved, the loss of his money, the resolve to obtain more at any cost, the first robbery, ending in murder, the news of his son's death—a felon slain by a fellow-criminal, the discovery of the man who had killed him, the discovery of Marie de la Mothe—the whole long record rolled out year after year before him, the various figures flitted past and mocked him, the voices of the dead whispered in his ears.

He was presented with a complete biography of his

life, written, not in words, but in scenes and pictures, scarcely less real than the incidents themselves.

The dying embers of the fire sank to a black heap of charred wood and ashes, marked with streaks and splashes of dull red. The cavern closed in upon the motionless figure, and the faint glow scarcely showed his face in relief against the encroaching wall of blackness. The silence was complete and unbroken, save for the ghostly little noises that came now and then from the glowing wood.

Then suddenly there came a piercing cry of terror, and the rocky wall echoed it and tossed it from side to side till it swelled into a long shriek of pain. Jordison started to his feet and stared round at the darkness with wide open eyes. For a moment a cold fear gripped his heart. Then he laughed, and, striking a match, lit one of the oil-lamps.

The light disclosed nothing, but as he listened he heard a faint mumbling and muttering in the distance. He smiled grimly. He realised that his victim was delirious. Anxious to gain some information from his ravings, he crossed over to the great wooden door and stood close to the opening.

"West, still west," muttered the voice. "Haul in that main sheet a bit, the wind's shifting. What in God's name is all that whisky for? Australia, eh? No, I won't consent. I will take her back to Valparaiso. A revolver, eh? Well, it's a good argument."

Then there was silence, and then low muttered sentences that Jordison could not catch, though he strained

every nerve to grasp their meaning. Then suddenly he heard a scuffle, and an arm shot out through the opening, and thin white fingers clutched the air. He seized the wrist and thrust it back, and he heard the heavy fall of a body on the rock.

Then there was again silence, and then the voice began again to speak.

"Two hundred thousand pounds!" it cried out. "You scoundrel! A fair chance for life, eh?—you devil, you missed that time. Ah, we're on equal terms now. A truce, eh? No! Well, take that and that and that. My God, I've killed him! For heaven's sake speak, Arthur! Speak, Sterious!" and the voice once more died away in an inaudible whisper.

Jordison leaned against the door, and a cold sweat broke out on his body. The dying man had called out to Arthur Sterious, and yet—

"Dickie's tired," the voice went on, "and where's mother, gone away on a visit? What do these two ugly men want? What do the fowls say, papa? Cluck, cluck, cluck, and cock-a-doodle-doo. Ugh! What a splash the body made. Good-by, Sterious, you brought it on yourself, you know. Cluck, cluck, cluck, and quack, quack. Oh, my God! water, water!" and the voice rose in a shriek of agony.

But before it had died away Jordison was tearing back the bolts and fumbling with the lock. Then he flung the massive door back with a crash, and fetching the lamp, leant over the form of the dying man and peered closely into his face.

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A few moments later he had borne him into the cavern and was pouring brandy and water down his throat, and Lipp, hastily summoned from his sleep, was rekindling the fire and preparing some soup.

For Jordison had at last come to the full knowledge of the awful truth, and knew that this was Richard Behag, and that he had been torturing his own son to death.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MYSTERY OF THE PAJARITO

"His life must be saved at any cost," said Jordison, as they tried to revive the exhausted man. "I have made a mistake—a terrible mistake. Why the hell doesn't that fire burn up? Pour some oil on it."

And all through that night the two men laboured with food and hot water and brandy and warm blankets. Lipp, understanding nothing of what was going on, cursed incessantly, but a glance at his master's grim and terrible face told him that he must labour till their task was accomplished. At six o'clock in the morning Arthur Holme slept, and the light of life had crept once more into his ashen face.

Twelve hours later he woke into consciousness. His wrists and ankles were lightly chained by pieces of rope, for Jordison knew that if ever he was to arrive at the truth, and conceal his own secret, he would have to play his part up to the end. In spite of his bonds, Holme felt warm and comfortable, and shortly after he woke, Jordison fed him with some thick and steaming soup. The young man took it without a word. When he had finished he looked at Jordison with questioning eyes.

"Yes," said Jordison sternly, "you've guessed right. I want some information out of you, and dead men can-

not speak. That soup is good, isn't it? Well, there's lots more of it. But you go back to the tunnel if you don't speak this time, and stay there till you rot. Do you understand?"

Holme nodded.

"If you tell me the truth," Jordison continued, "I'll be merciful; I'll shoot you and spare you much suffering, and I'll let Lady Agnes go free. Lipp, you may go."

The servant left the cavern. Holme pondered the matter for a minute and then smiled. If he had to die it was better to die in comfort than face the slow starvation and darkness of the tunnel. Besides, Lady Agnes' life would be saved. And the certainty of that was worth all that he could give—even the minute chance of his own escape.

"I'll speak," he said curtly. "I will tell you who I am. You said you were a friend of my father. I am Arthur Sterious, and I killed Richard Behag."

Jordison rose to his feet. "You lie," he cried. "I know well enough who you are. You are Richard Behag, and you killed Arthur Sterious."

Holme made no reply to Jordison's words. They had been flung at him as a thunder-bolt is flung from the skies. The noise and crash of them were still in his ears. He was too stunned to make any answer.

"Yes," Jordison continued sternly, "you are Richard Behag, and it was the body of Arthur Sterious that was found on the shores north of Valparaiso. He was murdered."

Still Holme did not speak. He clenched his bound hands and bowed his head. Jordison took out his watch and looked at it.

"In half an hour's time," he said quietly, "you will be a dead man. But if you will tell me the truth, and all the truth, I will release Lady Agnes Cliffe. If you refuse to speak, she shall die, too. I will give you two minutes to decide."

"Why do you want to know?" Holme replied; still not looking up from the ground; "of what interest is it to you? Who are you, and how does the death of either Behag or Sterious concern you?"

"It does not matter who I am," Jordison replied, "I have made you an offer, and you can take it or leave it. You have but a short time to consider the matter, and I should advise you not to waste it in conversation."

Jordison spoke calmly, but every nerve and fibre of his being tingled with excitement. He was playing a gigantic game of bluff. Whatever reply came from Holme's lips, the lives of both Holme and Lady Agnes Cliffe were safe. Jordison could not kill his own son or the woman that his son loved.

But the wretched man yearned for some word that would free his son from the cloud that hung over his head—the murder of a companion, the robbery of a firm that had placed their trust in him. If he held out the hope of life, it was possible that Holme would not speak the truth. But a man on the verge of death will not lie when he knows that no words can save his life.

If only Jordison could have revealed himself it would

have been easy to arrive at the truth. But the man, for all his vileness, had one clear idea of honour in his mind—that the son must never know the terrible history of the father's life. He sat silent with the watch in his hand.

"The two minutes are up," he said at last. If Holme had only looked at his face he might have read the truth, he might have seen that the man was waiting anxiously, not for a confession of crime, but for a proof of innocence. But Holme did not look up from the ground. However, the bribe was too great. Lady Agnes' life had to be saved at any cost. Jordison's bluff came off successfully.

"I will tell you all," the young man said, "but first you must swear by all you hold sacred—if indeed you hold anything sacred in heaven or earth—that Lady Agnes Cliffe shall return unmolested to her home."

"I swear this to you," Jordison said earnestly. Holme looked him in the face and saw that the man was speaking the truth.

"When I reached Valparaiso—" he began, but Jordison interrupted him.

"I should like you to start your story before that date. Why did you leave England?"

Holme paused for a moment.

"Surely you don't want to know that?" he said after a while.

"I do," Jordison answered. "I knew your father and mother, and you, too, as a little child. They were good folk. Why did you run away from them?" He had a horrible fear that this part of the young man's

story might disclose some fresh disgrace, some new evidence of the criminal instinct that had descended from father to son. His researches had failed to discover anything of the sort, but there are many sins which never come to light.

"Well," Holme replied, after another pause, "if you insist, I must tell you. But I cannot think of it without shame now that my father and mother are both dead." Again he stopped, and a look of pain crossed his face.

"Go on," Jordison said sternly, "look on me as your confessor. My lips are sealed."

Holme shuddered. The reference to confession brought the idea of death very close to him.

"It is a simple story," he said hoarsely, "and a commonplace story. I was young, headstrong, and passionately fond of the sea. My parents—may God rest their souls—thought the life unfitted for a lad of promise and intellect. My father, whose whole heart was in his work, thought that my life should be given to the propagation of Christianity in foreign parts. My heart did not fail me at the thought of the work; in fact, its dangers provided the only bright spot in the life it offered.

"But—well, they say the sons of clergymen are often inclined to be irreligious. I understand it now. The perpetual air of piety was galling to me. I felt like the girl behind the counter of the sweet-shop, who could not bear the taste of a single chocolate or caramel. The life had begun to stifle me. The air of the vicarage seemed close, narrow, and stuffy. The good side of it became

more and more obscured. The disadvantages became more and more apparent.

"I was overwhelmed with the sanctity of it all. I longed to be free, to mingle with rough worldly folk, to say whatever I pleased, to do whatever I pleased. I was, of course, entirely in the wrong, but—perhaps you can understand."

"I understand," Jordison replied.

"Well, one morning I disappeared with a few pounds in my pocket—the result of years of enforced thrift, set aside in a money-box—and concealed myself in the labyrinth of London. I got a job on a small merchant-vessel and——"

"That'll do," Jordison broke in. "Go on to Valparaiso." His heart yearned for every detail of his son's life, but he was impatient for the main central fact—the death of Arthur Sterious. One load had already been lifted from his mind. The boy had not left home to escape from the consequences of any disgraceful action. It was possible that the death of Arthur Sterious might yet be explained. Jordison could not wait for details.

"That was two years afterward," said Holme; "my sixth voyage. How much do you know?" Jordison told him briefly what the inquiry agent had disclosed.

"Well," said Holme, "I will now tell you the truth. It would not save my neck in the dock, but it is the truth for all that. I have no reason to tell you a lie. I am not a criminal lying for his life."

"I shall believe you," Jordison said hurriedly; "go on with the story."

"Well," Holme said, "one Sunday morning Arthur Sterious and I went out for a sail in his boat, the *Pajarito*."

"The robbery first," cried Jordison, "tell me of that. I know nothing of that." Holme looked up at him in surprise and laughed bitterly.

"Your interruption is excusable," he said slowly, "but I knew nothing of the robbery until after I was on the boat. Please let me tell my story in my own way."

Jordison mumbled an apology. His heart was too full for words. He could have risen and clasped his son in his arms. But he only turned away his face, lest the young man should see the joy that flared up in his eyes.

"Well," Holme continued, "as I was saying, one Sunday morning we went out for a sail in the *Pajarito*. We usually spent our Sundays on the water, sometimes in the large boat, but more often in the small one. Occasionally we did not return till daybreak on Monday morning. The boat contained two small but convenient berths; and a supply of water, biscuits, and tinned meat was always kept on board. A yachtsman has to be prepared for emergencies. The mere dropping of the wind may——"

"Yes, yes," Jordison interrupted impatiently; "but go on with your story."

"I mentioned the food," Holme continued with a slight frown, "because it was through a casual inspection of our supplies that my suspicion of Sterious was first aroused. We were at the time some twenty miles out of Valparaiso, running before a fair breeze off the land.

Sterious was at the tiller, and I went down into our little box of a cabin to get a drink of water.

"You can imagine my surprise on opening the locker, where we kept our jar, to find a dozen bottles of whisky lying up against it. I opened the other lockers and found them crammed with food of every description. I also found four more large jars of water in the fore cabin.

"I went up on deck and questioned Sterious. I think I asked him in jest if we were bound for Australia. He kept his eye on the burgee at our mast-head and replied that if I distracted his attention with silly questions he would certainly gybe the boat.

"I said nothing for a few minutes, but I lay on the deck and glanced at his face from time to time, and noticed a curious look on it. He kept his eyes fixed on the little fluttering flag as though all his wits were needed to steer by it. But I knew that this excessive care was quite unnecessary, and as I puffed thoughtfully at my pipe I turned the matter over in my mind, and, to say the truth, began to be a little uneasy about it. I offered to take the tiller, but he curtly refused, and still kept the boat's head into the west.

"After a time I repeated my question, and he looked at me thoughtfully, as though trying to gauge my interest in the matter. Then he made a clean breast of the whole affair. He spoke hastily, as though half ashamed of his words, but yet with an air of dogged determination that argued ill for any opposition on my part.

"He explained that he had stolen the keys of the safe

one from me and one from his father, and that he had on board at that minute five thousand pounds in cash and one hundred and ninety-five thousand pounds' worth of negotiable securities. He went on to say that he would have taken me earlier into his confidence, but that he had some doubts of my loyalty—I think that was the word he used.

“I thanked him in my heart for these doubts, and I saw at once the true reason of his friendship. I was at the time sorry, for I had a real liking for Sterious, in spite of all his vices. I did not then know to what depths a desperate man can sink, though I knew a few hours afterward.

“He went on to say that we were provisioned for a month, and that our destination was Iquiqui. He laboriously explained, as though defending himself, that he had chosen this means of escape for good reasons. He intended that the *Pajarito* should never be seen again, and that we should both be accounted dead men.

“He concluded by generously offering to go halves with me if I would assist him in his scheme. I will do the man justice on this point. He could have made away with me, and insured my silence effectually, but it was not till I had driven him in a corner that he attempted my life.

“He rounded off the effectiveness of his speech by casually producing a revolver and slipping it back into his pocket again. I was ten feet from him at the time, or I would have tried to take it from him before we started the discussion on the matter.

"I replied, as I think most men of my stamp would have done. I thanked him sarcastically for considering me in the matter. I reviled him in language that only a sailor could have conceived. I expostulated with him, and tried to work on his better feelings as a gentleman and the son of an honourable man. I pointed out to him the ruin he would bring on his father's firm. I exhausted every means in my power. But he was hard as steel, and I could not even scratch the surface of his mind. I concluded by stating emphatically that I meant to bring the *Pajarito* into Valparaiso that night, and save him from the consequences of his folly.

"We thrashed the matter out for two hours and he backed up his arguments with his pistol. I shall not forget those hours as long as I live. I can still see the blue, glorious sky, the dancing waves, the white swelling sails, the man at the stern, one hand on the tiller and one on his revolver, and above all the deepening lines of evil on the handsome face.

"In the end we compromised. He agreed to let me drop out of the business. He said he would put me ashore at a small village fifty miles north of Valparaiso, a place outside all railways and telegraph wires, and that he would go through the affair by himself. I swore to use no force to turn him from his purpose, and we resumed our relations as fellow-yachtsmen on a boat that required the attention of both of us.

"After lunch I felt drowsy and fell asleep. When I woke up I was lying on the deck with my face to the sky, and I was bound hand and foot. Sterious was at the

tiller, and I noticed with surprise that he had my clothes on. I saw my ring on his finger, and a gold Mexican coin which had been given me by one of the men on the *Valetta* dangled from my watch-chain on my waistcoat.

"I glanced at my own body. He had transferred all his own things to me. I was dressed in his clothes, and his rings were on my fingers. I could even feel something strange about my shirt and underclothing. It was evident that he had drugged me and changed every single article of my attire. His motives were unpleasantly clear.

"So long as I was alive this mere change of habiliments could be of no value to him, but my body, washed up some weeks hence on the coast, unrecognisable save for the garments, rings, etc., would be an adequate proof of the death of Arthur Sterious. Before I spoke I carefully examined his face. A great change had come over it during the last few hours. All the evil seemed to have worked up to the surface. It had always been dissolute, but now it had become criminal.

"I will not detail to you the conversation that ensued and which lasted for over an hour. Sterious made it quite clear to me that he intended to kill me. He also confessed that he had been too much of a coward to kill me in cold blood, while I was unconscious. He suggested that I should have a fight for my life, but explained that it would have to be a fight where I was bound to lose the day—the fight of an unarmed man against one armed with a revolver.

"I thanked him for his consideration and accepted

the chance in the spirit in which it was offered. He was at least as much of a sportsman as the man who fights a partridge with a double-barrelled gun.

"He loosed my hands and sprang back to the tiller. I unfastened the rest of the ropes myself, and took cover behind the mast. He fired once and splintered the wood by my face. But before he could fire again the wind suddenly shifted, and the boat gybed. He hauled at the main sheet with one hand, but was too late. The boom came flying across, and he had only just time to duck his head. The heavy spar caught his hand and sent the revolver spinning into the water. We were once more on equal terms.

"I suggested a truce, but he would have none of it, and wrenching out the iron tiller from the rudder, he came at me. As luck would have it, the spare tiller, which was larger than the one in ordinary use, and reserved for dirty weather, lay up against the fore combings. Before he could reach me I was ready to meet him.

"Every detail of that fight, which lasted for over ten minutes, is still vivid in my mind. I will only tell you, however, that in the end I broke through his guard with a terrific blow, and the square end of my tiller crashed into his skull. He died without a sound or a word.

"At first I resolved to return to Valparaiso and tell the whole story to the authorities. But on second thoughts I saw the inherent improbability of the tale. It would certainly have been believed, as, indeed, your detective gathered from the police, that we had both

made off with the securities, and quarrelled over the division of the spoil. Moreover, justice in South America and in England are two different things. Sterious was the son of a wealthy man, and I had no doubt his father's position would influence the judge in his decision.

"To cut a long story short, I sailed the boat northward to within five miles of a desolate shore, took the securities from Sterious' pocket and the cash from the locker where he had placed it, and threw the body overboard. I left the clothes, &c., as Sterious himself had arranged them. I had now similar reasons for preserving my secret. I wished the world to think that Richard Behag was dead.

"That night I scuttled the *Pajarito* in fifty fathoms of water, and rowed ashore in the dinghey. I subsequently made my way to Iquiqui, and took the first ship to England.

"On my arrival I posted all the stolen property to its lawful owners, only keeping back two thousand pounds for my own use. This was almost the precise amount that I had to my credit in Valparaiso, as the result of a lucky speculation in wheat, and which I knew would be confiscated. It is odd that the police did not seize upon this clue and arrive at the true facts.

"Of my doings in England it is sufficient to say that I have worked hard, and trebled my money in four years. I have since tried to lead a more intellectual and a better life, and my plans for the future——"

He stopped suddenly. He remembered that his

plans for the future had been arranged for by Jordison.

"Is there anything more you want to know?" he broke out, fiercely and sullenly.

"Nothing," replied Jordison faintly.

"Do you believe what you have already heard?"

"I believe you," the man replied. Then he buried his face in his hands, and his whole frame trembled with emotion—with joy at his son's innocence, with agony at the blood-stained record of his own life. And there, in the quiet depths of the earth, he silently vowed once more to keep all knowledge of his identity from his son, and prayed that he might have the strength to keep his vow to the end.

CHAPTER XXX

"VENGEANCE IS MINE"

"I only ask two things of you," said Jordison, "and then you shall both go free."

He was standing by the iron gate at the end of the tunnel. Arthur Holme and Lady Agnes Cliffe both faced him. Their wrists were still bound, but their faces glowed with the light of a great joy. They had been very near to death, but now life, and all that life meant to them, was within their grasp. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, the man who had held them in his cruel grip had bid them both go free.

The night was over and the day was at hand. The sun itself, now rising from the east and turning the wide expanse of wet sand into a glory of gold, was not so resplendent as the light of freedom that had suddenly flashed up from the dark horizon of pain and death.

"I only ask two things of you," repeated Jordison, "but you must swear on the holy cross that you will do them. In the first place, you must both swear never to reveal, either directly or indirectly, this hiding-place of mine, nor give any assistance, either direct or indirect, to those who desire to capture me."

"I will swear that," replied Holme sternly, "though God knows what evil I shall do the community."

Lady Agnes murmured some words to the same effect, and Jordison produced a small bone cross.

“This cross,” he said, “was found in these caverns, in the bony fingers of a man who perhaps died for his faith in the time of the Romans. It is, without doubt, a most holy and sacred relic. You will each swear the oaths I desire by your God and the hope of your future salvation, and you will each kiss this symbol of your faith to seal the words you have spoken.”

Holme swore the desired oath and kissed the little cross. Then Lady Agnes did the same, repeating the words in a faint and faltering voice, and shuddering as her lips touched the bone symbol of early Christianity.

“Now,” continued Jordison, “you must each swear to me a separate oath. You, Arthur Holme, must swear that you will tell Lady Agnes Cliffe the true story of your life, and that you will marry her before a year has passed. You, Lady Agnes Cliffe, must swear that you will marry the man you love in spite of all opposition on the part of your parents. There is nothing disgraceful in his past history. He is a true and sterling man. I have done him a great wrong, and I intend to repair it. Do you both agree to swear these oaths?”

The two young people looked at each other in bewilderment. They could hardly believe their ears. Jordison had attempted both their lives, and now, as an alternative to death, he asked them to swear to fulfil the dearest wish of their hearts. They could understand the necessity of the first oath, but the second was incomprehensible.

"Why?" began Holme in a stammering voice.

"Don't ask any questions," broke in Jordison savagely and abruptly, "for I shan't answer them. Will you swear?"

"I will, so help me God," Holme said fervently, "if Lady Agnes——" and he stopped and looked inquiringly at the woman he loved.

"Yes, Arthur," she said faintly. Her white face flushed with crimson, and there was a tender light in her eyes.

They both swore the oath, and once more they kissed the cross.

"The hardway goes round to the back of the island," said Jordison. "Keep close to the land until you come to a white piece of rock. Then strike across the sand in a straight line between the white rock and a black post on the shore beyond the salt marsh. You will then find a road and have no difficulty in reaching home. Be sure and keep the straight line between the points I have named. On either side of you lies an enemy that will not be as merciful to you as William Jordison."

With these words Jordison took out a knife and cut their bonds and they were free. Without another word he unlocked the iron gate, and swinging it back on its hinges, stood aside to let them pass. They went out together without a word.

Jordison watched their figures disappear round the end of the tunnel. He closed the gate with a crash and locked it. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and picking up a lamp from the ground, retraced his steps

into the tunnel. And so William Jordison went back into the darkness, and his son went out into the light.

Twelve hours later the black car stood in the centre of the cavern ready for its last journey. Jordison had decided to run it to within a few miles of Liverpool before daybreak, and to make his way from that port to America. He had shaved his beard and moustache, and his gaunt face looked wolfish and hideous in its nakedness.

Lipp had packed such things as they required for the voyage in two trunks, and placed them on the car. Concealed about their clothes, sewn here and there in linings, scattered singly so as to escape the notice of the most diligent custom's officer, were fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels. They had been picked from the settings and occupied an amount of space that was ridiculously small compared to their value.

Lipp lit the lamps, and the two men took their seats in the car. Then Jordison started the engines, and a few seconds later they glided through the open door and slipped down the long narrow passage to the sea. When they emerged into the open the moon was shining brightly over the waste of sand and water.

Jordison steered slowly round the island till he reached the white rock, then he turned off at right angles and made straight for a twinkling speck of yellow in the west. The black post was invisible in the night, but this light, which shone from the West Ray lightship, lay some ten miles beyond in the same straight line.

They crossed the dangerous sands in safety, though

every now and then a sudden sinking of the wheel warned the driver that he had run over the edge of the track. They then glided up a gentle slope, passed over the edge of the bank which kept the tide out of the low lying land, and went slowly westward over the marshes.

The road was execrable. It was little more than a grass track, and the stones that had originally formed its foundation protruded through the thin layer of soil. It ran parallel to the road leading to the Red House some eight miles north of it, and joined the old Roman causeway.

It had been originally constructed to bring up sand and shingle from the beach, but had not been used for many years. Where it joined the causeway it had sunk several inches, and was submerged for ten yards in a shallow lake of water. On either side of it lay many miles of desolate marsh-land.

When the motor-car reached the main road Jordison turned to the left and went southward. Lipp pointed out in picturesque language that this was not the way to Liverpool.

"I am aware of that, Lipp," Jordison replied grimly. "I have to call at Heatherstone Hall first."

Lipp pointed out the risk and broke into a torrent of oaths at Jordison's foolhardiness. But the latter intimated that his servant could leave the car then and there if he liked, and Lipp relapsed into sullen silence.

Shortly after eleven o'clock the car glided under the shadows of the overhanging trees in the park. Jordison alighted and told Lipp to keep his eyes and ears

open. If any one discovered the car he was to run straight back to the cavern. He, Jordison, would understand what had happened, and could make his way to their hiding-place on foot.

When he had given these final instructions he climbed over the wall and made his way through the plantation into the park. His gaunt face looked horrible in the moonlight. The loss of his beard and moustache laid bare all the evil lines of his features. The head of a vulture peering round for the dead carcass of man or beast was not more loathly to look upon.

And Jordison's errand that night was death. He had resolved to kill Marie de la Mothe before he left England. Then, at last, his lifework would be accomplished. He had found his son and provided for the young man's future happiness. It only remained to pay the debt he owed to the woman who had made him the thing he was.

His unbalanced mind, no longer able to distinguish between right and wrong, saw no evil in the thing he was about to do. The cold-blooded murder of a defenceless woman had assumed the appearance of a splendid act of justice.

Jordison compared himself to an executioner who carries out the sentence of the law. No criminal, he argued to himself, was more worthy of death than this woman. She had taken no life, but she had ruined that which was more precious than mere physical existence—the soul of a man who might have done much good, but who had sunk lower than the beasts that perish.

Jordison saw nothing of his own free will in the matter. He only saw that all the misery and crime of his life lay at the door of Marie de la Mothe, and for that he had sentenced her to death.

He crept slowly through the park, moving on all fours from tree to tree, and crawling slowly to the great white house that glistened in the moonlight. He was but a small black patch on the grass, to the eye of his God no more than a wolf advancing on his prey, but to himself the stern shadow of impending doom, resistless, glorious in his purpose, inevitable.

In either pocket lay a heavy loaded revolver, and he carried a dozen spare cartridges. But these weapons were only to be used in case of discovery, when he might be cornered and have to fight for his life. For the purpose of his mission he trusted to a pair of muscular hands, the primeval weapons of man.

When he reached the house he was surprised to see that it was in darkness. Not a single light appeared in the long line of windows, save that which the glass reflected back from the moon. As a rule the Heatherstones entertained largely while they were in residence, and had guests at dinner nearly every night in the week. But to-night they had evidently gone to bed early, and Jordison was grateful for the good-fortune which had smiled on his enterprise. It was, in his own mind, but one more proof that he was a chosen instrument of justice.

He crept cautiously through the shrubbery and made his way to the north side of the house. He effected an

entrance through one of the windows of the servants' hall, and, taking off his boots, groped his way to the foot of the big staircase. He ascended this, and found himself in a long corridor, dimly lit by two gas-jets, turned down to small bluish tongues of flame. He walked along it on tiptoe, and came into another and wider corridor, thickly carpeted and leading to the principal bedrooms of the east wing.

Here he was on known ground, and had no difficulty in locating the door of the Countess' bedroom. It was, as he had ascertained many months previously, the third door from the end of the corridor.

He placed his fingers on the handle and, turning it softly, opened the door. Once again good-fortune was on his side, for after the burglaries at Heatherstone Hall it was more than probable that it would have been locked. The room was in total darkness. He entered quickly and, closing the door behind him, turned the key.

Once in the room and out of the light of the passage he breathed more securely. He leaned against the wall and listened. There was absolute silence. His hand touched the switch of the electric light. Then he hesitated. Though he knew that heaven would applaud his deed, he had no wish to see the thing he was about to do. No, she should die there in the darkness. It was a more fitting end to her life.

He held his breath and listened again. He thought it odd that he could not hear the sound of her breathing. The sudden thought struck him that he had perhaps,

after all, mistaken the room, or that the family had left Heatherstone Hall, and that Lady Heatherstone, departing from her habits of over two years, had gone with them. Once more he placed his hand upon the switch, and once more he hesitated.

Then he crept stealthily from the wall, and as he moved across the soft carpet to the bed, he suddenly noticed that there was a strange smell in the room, a sweet, sickly smell like perfume or the scent of hothouse flowers. For some reason or other it brought back a vivid memory of a scene in his past life—the first day he had ever kissed Marie de la Mothe. He remembered it well. She was pinning a gardenia in his button-hole.

When he reached the edge of the bed he stopped and again listened. Then he passed his hand lightly over the coverlet and discovered that there was some one lying beneath it. Then he moved his fingers along the recumbent form and across a pair of folded arms, till they touched the outline of a face hidden beneath a piece of velvet.

He knew then that it was the face of the Countess of Heatherstone. He passed his hands under the edge of the mask and suddenly gripped the throat.

But directly his fingers closed on the neck he whipped his hands away and staggered back from the bed, with difficulty suppressing a cry of horror. The flesh was cold as marble, and the chill of it went through his whole body from head to foot.

He crept through the darkness till he found the switch by the door. Then he turned the light on and looked

toward the bed. There lay the Countess of Heatherstone with her arms folded across her breast, and a cross of white flowers at her feet.

William Jordison went over and looked at her long and earnestly. The white hand of death had hidden the ravages of disease, as snow hides the ugliness of a devastated land.

Then suddenly he stepped forward, and replacing the velvet mask on her face, crept from the room like a beaten hound. God had taken her punishment into his own hands, and William Jordison knew that his Maker had discarded him, as a man discards a broken knife.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST RIDE

When Jordison, white-faced and panting, reached the edge of the plantation, he paused and listened. He heard the sound of a voice sharp, querulous, and insistent. He could not catch the words, but he could distinguish Lipp's growl in reply. Then he heard two other voices, stern and deep-toned, and then a reply that was unmistakable—the report of a revolver. Then the sound of three shots fired almost simultaneously; and then a loud cry, and two voices talking together in low tones.

Jordison crept softly through the copse to the wall on his hands and knees, and pulled out his revolver.

"You cursed fool!" he heard a voice say, "you've jacked up the whole concern now. Yes, he's dead enough, but it's only the servant. The other is bound to have heard the firing and cleared off. Poor old Saunders! He's done for."

"Stop your jaw, Williams, and get our car out of sight. We'll have——"

A thin tongue of fire spat out from Jordison's revolver, and the man lurched forward to the ground. His companion turned, fired, and hit the stone coping by Jordison's head. Before he could fire again, two bul-

lets were in his body and he reeled over onto the road.

Jordison looked sharply round to see if any more men were concealed in the shadow under the trees. He could distinguish nothing in the darkness, but he argued that they would all have emerged onto the road after the first *mêlée* with Lipp, and climbed swiftly over the wall.

A large motor-car stood in the middle of the road and three bodies lay in various attitudes on the ground. He cast a hasty glance at them and turned his attention to Lipp. His servant had fallen forward over the steering-wheel. His face was red with blood and he was quite dead. Jordison lifted the limp figure to the ground, and for one brief moment a pang of sorrow touched his hard heart. This fellow, vile and brutal as he was, had been a faithful servant, even to the end.

But it was no time for sentiment. Jordison, remembering the hidden jewels, stripped the coat off the dead man and flung it into the bottom of the car. Then he took his seat, started the engines, gripped the steering-wheel that was wet with blood, and pulled the lever. The car glided out of the shadow of the trees, made a half-circle and moved northward along the Roman causeway, gathering speed with every mile it went. When it ran inland from the Essex marshes, it was travelling at ninety miles an hour.

The driver's white stern face was bent forward and his eyes never left the road before him for the thousandth part of a second. Jordison realised that he must get within walking distance of Liverpool that night.

He was afraid to take the simpler form of locomotion that the railway offered. He guessed that every station was watched. He knew that, after the disappearance of Arthur Holme and Lady Agnes Cliffe, hue and cry would be raised over the whole of England, and that every county would again blossom forth in amateur detectives and ardent motorists pursuing each other persistently. It was clear, too, that men were abroad that night who meant business. The four dead bodies at the foot of Heatherstone Park testified to that much, at any rate. Jordison knew that his only hope of escape lay in the darkness. He could slip past his pursuers under cover of the night, but with the rising of the sun he would have to abandon the car, and take to some less conspicuous means of progress. Whatever happened he had to reach Liverpool that night.

He slipped through Essex into Hertfordshire, and it was not till he reached the smooth slopes by Royston that any further incident occurred. Here a large white car dashed suddenly out of a bye-road, missed his hind wheels by a foot, and tore madly after him up a long, gentle incline. To use a colloquial but expressive phrase, he "left it standing," but he did not get away before its occupants, three Cambridge undergraduates, had examined him thoroughly in the light of their lamps. Twenty-five minutes later the white car spun into Cambridge, woke up the police and the telegraph office, and the news began to flash through the length and breadth of England that William Jordison was tearing northward under cover of the night.

Fast as the black car flew, the telegrams flew faster, and every town north of Cambridge that had a telegraph office open at that hour of the night spread out its news by rail and bicycle and telephone, till more than half of the police in England knew that there was no chance of sleep for them till the morning. It was a bad look-out for the drivers of dark cars, and before sunrise many of them regretted their choice of colour for the bodies of their machines. They were stopped, hailed off to police stations, led into traps, and even fired at by reckless and enthusiastic pursuers. It was a night never to be forgotten by the motorists of England.

Jordison at first recked little of the tumult he had aroused over the whole of the country. He knew that the occupants of the white car would give the alarm, probably at Cambridge or Bedford, but he guessed that the police were heartily sick of false alarms and that they would move slowly and cautiously in the matter. What he did not know, however, was that one of the undergraduates was the son of the Home Secretary, and that his name was sufficient to raise a faint hope of promotion in the heart of every inspector in the country.

Jordison steered a course midway between Cambridge and Bedford, and passing through St. Neots and Kimbolton made his way westward into Northamptonshire. On a bye-road between Kettering and Wellingborough he first became aware of the storm he had raised. A policeman on a bicycle suddenly flashed out of the darkness into the light of his lamps. The man cried out to him to stop, flung himself off his machine

just in time to save his life, saw his bicycle tossed into the air, and then vanished in the darkness behind.

In two minutes' time Jordison had reached the next village and saw the flare of lanterns in the street. A dozen burly labourers armed with axes, billhooks, and pitchforks blocked the way. He drove full speed at them and they sprang aside. One of them was too late. There was a jolt and a scream and an axe whizzed past Jordison's ear. He looked back and saw the lights clustered round something on the ground. Then he laughed. He was beginning to see that motorists would have a lively time that night.

This was but the first of a series of incidents. Before he had passed through Leicestershire he had run over two policemen, smashed a dog-cart to pieces, and received five pellets from a gun in his left arm. Four revolver bullets had struck the car and one had chipped a piece off the steering-wheel.

He was now getting into a more densely populated county, and many of the inhabitants of Staffordshire were on the roads to meet him. The police had now had time to lay traps for him, and the whole country—a veritable network of telegraph and telephone wires—followed his movements almost as accurately as though they had been lined out in red ink on a map. His lights showed him the road a hundred yards ahead, and he avoided most of these traps—baulks of timber, carts, &c.—by stopping the car, reversing the engines, and running backward till he could turn down a side road. But they caused him endless annoyance, and the con-

stant turning and twisting began to so confuse his sense of locality that he had more than once to consult a small compass.

It was not, however, till he was on the borders of Shropshire that he encountered the racing-car which was destined to play so memorable a part in the events of that night. It came on him suddenly at right angles, as he was running at half speed over the join of four cross-roads. To avoid a collision he was forced to wrench his car round to the left and run westward. The driver of the grey car, which was running at full speed, jammed on his brakes and swerved to the right to avoid a collision. As it was, he ran level with Jordison's car for fifty yards. There were three people in the car and they yelled out to Jordison to stop. But before they could recover the pace they had lost by putting on the brakes, he had worked his engines almost up to the top speed and had shot ahead of them.

Jules Simon, the driver of the grey car, had just come from the great speed trials at Manchester, and in his pocket reposed the gold medal he had wrested from some of the finest cars in England. His machine was own sister to the one Lord Harry Quay had purchased, and in the hands of a driver who had few equals either in England or the Continent it had performed wonders. With a flying start it had covered the mile in thirty-three seconds, and in a subsequent test had been the first car in the world to run a hundred miles in the hour. On his way back to London, Jules Simon had received the news about Jordison at Whitchurch, and,

rousing a local gunmaker from his sleep, had purchased a revolver and a box of fifty cartridges before proceeding on his way southward. As Jordison shot forward into the darkness two bullets sang past him, very wide of their mark, but an unpleasant reminder that he might be the victim of a chance shot from an unskilled hand. He shouted at them derisively, but could not reply in their own fashion. Both his hands were required for the steering-wheel, and he could not take his eyes from the white strip of ground that unwound itself into the darkness.

Jordison cursed the ill-luck that had driven him out of his course, but he had resolved to take the first turning to the right and work his way back to the north. He had no doubt when he passed the other car that he would soon leave it so far behind that he could safely slacken speed before turning a corner. But in this particular case Jordison had reckoned without his host. Five minutes after he had passed his pursuers, he cast a hasty glance backward and saw the light of the other car a bare half-mile behind him. In a flash he realised that this only meant the difference between two cars of almost equal speed, one of which had been obliged to work up its pace after a liberal use of the brakes. He realised, too, that the distance between them, at the pace at which both were travelling, represented a bare fifteen seconds of time, and that any diminution of speed on his part would probably bring the other car crashing into him before he could round a corner. And even if this were not so, he saw that his pursuers would be able

to keep so close to him that he would in all likelihood be unable to get clear away from them. This would effectually prevent him from abandoning the car before he reached Liverpool, and, if he encountered another trap on the road, would mean an encounter from which he would probably be unable to escape with his life. The question of petrol had also to be considered. He had run now two hundred and fifty miles, and another four hundred would exhaust his supply. He had counted on being able, in case of absolute necessity, to break open some petrol store and get as much as he wanted. This would be impossible now that all the countryside was up in arms against him, and doubly impossible with a fast racing-car clinging to his heels.

Jordison at last realised that fortune was against him, and he decided to run back to his hiding-place and trust to having better luck another night. He gradually worked his way round to the southeast, and, leaving Shrewsbury on his left, ran down into Worcestershire, crossed the Severn, put his car at the great slopes of the Cotswold Hills, and spun over this wide tableland till he shot down into the green valley of the Thames.

By the time he had left Woodstock on his right, his pursuers were quite two miles behind him. Every now and then, at the end of some long, straight stretch of road or on the slopes of some hill, he caught a glimpse of their lamps. Drive as he would—and he drove like a maniac that night—he could not shake them off, but he was slowly wresting the ground from them, foot by foot, and he calculated that, by the time he reached

Essex, he would be far enough ahead to slip unobserved into his hiding-place.

The pursuit, save for that single car which had clung to him for over a hundred miles, seemed to have died away. He encountered no obstacles, and he flashed through sleeping villages, unseen and unopposed. The bark of a dog, the neigh of a horse, the distant rattle of a train, the hoot of an owl, were the only sounds to break the silence, save the low hiss of the wheels beneath him. The clamour and awakening of the night, which had hemmed him in on every side in the populous north, had completely died away. He congratulated himself on having decided to return to his place of concealment and on having chosen so quiet a route. The real truth of the matter was, however, that he was still supposed to be running northward, and that the double back to the south had upset all the elaborate police arrangements for his capture. The officials at Cambridge had drawn an imaginary line passing through Harlech, Warwick, Cambridge, and Ipswich, and had only had time to telegraph to a few large towns south of that line.

The black car had now run nearly four hundred miles, and the strain of the headlong rush through the darkness would have shattered the nerves of any ordinary man. But William Jordison was scarcely human that night. No automaton of steel and iron could have been less susceptible to fatigue or fear. He had become a soulless machine with two rigid hands riveted to the steering-wheel, and with two motionless eyes fixed on the road before him. The great car that hummed and

vibrated beneath him was more a thing of life than the man who steered it on its course. His thoughts were neither of the past nor future; neither of the dead woman nor of a living son; neither of misery nor happiness; neither of fear nor love nor hate. They were only occupied and centred on one thing—the road with its white surface, its blurred hedges, and its sign-posts flashing up mile after mile and directing him on his way.

As he passed to the north of Aylesbury the wind rose, and driving sheets of rain beat into his face and blurred his sight, and turned the clean road into a stream of soft mud. The sign-posts became illegible, and he steered like a sailor by the compass, running due east and hoping to strike the Essex road at some point where his local knowledge would be of service to him. The lights of the grey car had vanished altogether in the blinding curtain of rain, and he knew that his own lamps would be invisible. There was no longer any danger of being overtaken, but there was every prospect of his not finding the old Roman causeway.

The southeasterly wind increased in violence until it became a gale. The rain did not cease, but was driven against him like points of steel. The great car hissed through the storm with a resistless force, but its speed was materially reduced. The roadway flew up from the wheels in streams and fountains of mud. Jordison, grim and immovable, was drenched as though he had just emerged from the sea.

At last, though he knew it not, he crossed the borders of Hertfordshire and rushed into Essex. He could not

see more than fifty yards in front of him. He only knew that he was still going into the east. Upward slopes, downward grades, flat stretches of level road, conveyed nothing to his mind. His sense of locality was gone; the east, the sea-line was his only boundary. When he reached it, fortune alone would take him north or south to his destination.

Then at last the boundary came out at him like a flash out of the darkness. There was a sudden roughening of the road, the crunch of shingle and clatter of stones, and he brought his car to a dead stop. Looking round he could see nothing but stones and sand with a patch of sea-lavender and a glistening curtain of water that streamed like a silvery waterfall from the dark heavens above.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE ROAD ON THE SANDS

Jordison dismounted from the car and listened attentively. He could hear nothing but the roar of the wind and rain. It was evident that the sea was some way from him. Then he took the oil tail-light from its bracket and proceeded to examine the shore. It was absolutely necessary for him to discover whether he lay north or south of his destination.

He walked nearly a quarter of a mile in either direction, but he discovered nothing that afforded any clue to his whereabouts. The low flat land, the beach strewn with its waving lines of sticks, corks, and rubbish, the narrow little creeks of glistening mud, the small islets of green herbage on the sands themselves, were common to most of the coast-line of Essex. On every side the rain descended and blotted out all landmarks that did not lie close to his feet. Seaward no lightship twinkled through the gloom, and inland there was nothing to be seen from which he could glean a single shred of information.

He retraced his steps to the car and consulted the compass. The shore ran north and south. That much at least was certain, but whether the Triplets lay to the south or to the north was more than he could tell from

the meagre information at his disposal. He made up his mind to work his way slowly inland until he reached some sign-post or some point from which he could trace his way to the Roman road. He drew out a piece of bread from under the seat and devoured it eagerly, like a wolf tearing at a lump of flesh. Then he drank a quarter of a pint of neat brandy, lit a pipe and resumed his seat in the car.

Scarcely, however, had he buttoned the leather rug over his knees when his ears caught a new sound from out of the night—the faint beat and throb of engines in the distance, only distinguishable from the roar of the wind by the regular rhythm which gradually increased in volume and distinctness. He turned round and saw two faint specks of light through the driving rain. And even as he looked, they increased in size. Quick as thought he pulled up a chain beneath his feet and started his engines. It was a moment in which a matter of life and death had to be decided in a few seconds of time. Behind him lay a closed road, before him the sand and the sea. A man's mind moves quickly in moments like these.

First he thought it would be best to turn round, and drive straight at them. If they moved aside, he escaped. If they stood in his path, they died or were broken—and he too would either be killed outright or so horribly maimed that he could not escape. Then he thought that he would abandon the car, and slink away into the marshes under cover of the night, trusting to good-fortune to make the Triplets at the next tide. Both these

Plans were cast aside as soon as they were formed. The first, because it would be next to impossible to turn his car and get any speed on his engines before the other car was upon him; and the second, because he would have to abandon his ultimate means of reaching some large port, from which he could elude the vigilance of the police and escape from the country.

There was only one third course open to him, and he took it. He pulled the lever and the great car crashed and rattled down the shingle toward the sea. Here, at any rate, his pursuers might well hesitate to follow. Few men care to make their way over the Essex flats after dark on foot. No one but a man who cared nothing for his life would rush on to their treacherous surface in a heavy motor-car.

He ground through the rattling shingle and heard the soft squelch of mud beneath his wheels. Before he had run one hundred yards toward the sea, the cry of voices rose above the storm, and, looking back, he saw the yellow eyes of the pursuing car glaring at him from the bank of shingle. A second later three bullets sang over his head. He had no time to reply, but moved his lever on to the next speed, and, as he did so, a thin switch rose up wet and glistening on his right, and vanished into the darkness.

He turned his car round and made for it, and before he reached it the wheels rolled up from the soft slime onto a hard jolting surface, and another switch gleamed in the light of his lamps. And then at last he realised where he was.

For eight miles along the coast of Essex and at a distance of some two hundred yards from the shore, there runs a hardway of firm sand, strengthened and compacted by thousands of tons of ballast. Every half-mile or so a similar track runs off at right angles to it and joins some road on the land. The island, which it skirts, used at one time to depend almost entirely for its means of communication on this veritable sea road. The scattered hamlets, dotted here and there along its coast, were so cut off from each other by creeks and inlets that they found this the simplest method of overcoming their difficulties. The hardway was marked out by slender switches planted in the sand. It had been little used since the introduction of new roads and bridges on the island itself, but occasionally a cart toiled along its dreary surface, or some belated fisherman, stranded on the sands, which run out here nearly six miles at low tide, crawled homeward along it, a mere black speck of a man with his face ever turned toward the grey line of sea. For the path had claimed many victims in its time. Some had been washed away by the encroaching tide; others, less fortunate, had splashed shoreward through the rising waters and been sucked down into the sands that never gave up their dead.

Jordison was in that mood which risks everything on the single cast of a die, and, besides, a cornered man cannot be overcareful in his methods. The southerly end of the hardway lay within two miles of his hiding-place. If he could reach the end of it in safety, it would be easy work to go inland and make his way round to the road

which ran down to his own path across the sands. It was more than an even chance that his pursuers would not care to follow him to the end. They were strangers to the district and knew nothing of the road. The fear of the sea would be in their minds, and the treacherous sands on either side of them would soon tell them of the terrible doom that lurked in the darkness. They had little to gain and much to lose. Jordison on the other hand had nothing to lose and much to gain. He guided his motor onto the hardway and ran southward at twenty miles an hour.

It was a hideous night, drenched with rain and icy with the nor'easter that had risen into a gale. On the flat sand, with no shelter to east or west, Jordison felt the full fury of the storm. It beat down on him with a hiss of wind and waters. It seemed as though heaven itself was crashing down from the sky above and trying to beat the life out of him. On either side the dun sands faded away into the darkness. Switches flashed up and disappeared. More than once the car lurched over as a wheel sank into the soft, cruel bed that watched and waited for a man's life. But the powerful car broke from the fetters before they became too strong, and hurled itself back onto safe ground.

At the end of five minutes Jordison looked back. Not a light was to be seen. He was alone in the darkness. The occupants of the other car had either been afraid to follow him or else were some way behind in the chase. It was even possible that they had run off

the causeway and that they were held for all time in the grip of the quicksands.

Jordison brought his car to a dead stop and listened. He fancied he could hear the shriek of human voices, but the sound was scarcely to be distinguished from the howling of the wind. Yet he shuddered at the picture it called up to his imagination. He was a man who had passed through many dangers and who scarcely knew what it was to be afraid. But, as he sat there and listened to the wind, he was seized with a sudden fear, born of the darkness and the solitude and the death that lurked on either side of him.

It crept up to him and sprang suddenly as a beast springs on its prey, and gripped his heart till he almost cried aloud with terror. It came up across the miles of dun sand from the sea—a silent shadow with noiseless feet. It was not in the thunder nor the earthquake, but in the still small voice. It was the herald of the God to whom vengeance belongeth.

For five minutes William Jordison sat motionless, and the sleeting arrows of silver rain seemed to weave a network over his eyes and brain. He was powerless to move, helpless, a shivering coward, weak as a child. And then the fear left him as suddenly as it came. He roused himself to action, resolved to take the first turning landward, and once more sent the black car gliding through the storm.

Before he had gone a hundred yards, however, the bright fan of light before him suddenly dimmed, there was a faint fizzle, and the acetylene lamps went out.

He stopped the car and examined them. The carbide was exhausted into a mere heap of grey dust. He had no more on the car. A single oil-lamp, a mere candle after the white glare of the Bleriot lights, was all that he had left to guide him through the perils of that road across the sands.

He started once more on his journey, but slowly, as one who feels his way in the darkness. And, as he moved forward, Fear once again crept softly into the car and sat by his side. The shadows of the sands seemed to be gathering more deeply around him. The glare of the acetylene had been dimmed into the feeble yellow light of the oil-lamp. And the strong spirit that had burned within Jordison's iron frame died down into a flickering flame. The man's nerve was gone. He had been strung up to concert pitch, and the cord had snapped. Dangers which he would have laughed at a couple of hours before, loomed gigantic upon him out of the darkness.

The wide flats stretching eastward and the lonely marshes that bounded the quicksands to the west were thickly peopled for him that night. The ghosts of the dead that the sea had given to the shore, and the dead that the sands would never disgorge till the day of judgment, moaned and gibbered at him through the storm. Marie de la Mothe floated white and still from the web of rain, and he could smell the scent of hothouse flowers. His wife crouched by a dripping switch to his left. Jermy and Susanson crawled along by the wheels. Lipp, with a sullen scowl, sat by his side, and his pres-

ence was cold as the nor'easter that beat across from the sea. The black heavens moved with countless whirling images, and uncouth faces and arms were thrust up from the yellow sands to mock at him.

In the dim light and in the tumult of his disordered brain, Jordison passed one of the bye-paths to the shore; and before he reached the next he heard a new sound among the voices of the night, the low splash of water, a feeble sound compared to the whistling and shrieking of the gale, but insistent and continuous—the first faint pulsing of the mighty ocean, the tip of the forefinger of a resistless arm.

A few seconds later a smooth, thin fold of water was flung across the path, and the wheels sent up a tiny spurt of spray. Jordison awoke from the terrors of his overwrought brain to the real danger that faced him. He cast a hurried glance at his watch and realised in a flash that he had miscalculated the tide by at least half an hour, and that the nor'easter, which was heaping up the waters on the land, had magnified this error into one of serious importance.

He quickened his pace so as to gain the next turning while there was still some chance of following out the road. The thin film of water, harmless in itself, was yet enough to blur sand and causeway into an indistinguishable plain of sea. As the car shot forward, tiny waves began to ripple across its path, and the wheels churned them into white foam and a continuous shower of spray.

The tide runs up the North Ray flats with incredible

swiftness, and, with an easterly wind behind it, it slops along like a mill-race. Before Jordison had gone another quarter of a mile, it was nearly up to his axles, and the great car shuddered as it ploughed the waters into creamy foam. Jordison's whole body was cold as a marble statue. His indomitable spirit was beaten down and crushed by the elements. The hissing rain, the shrieking and buffeting wind, the surging waters, the impenetrable darkness, all closed on him in unison. He had to fight them single-handed, with such strength as one man may have, and the throbbing force of the machinery beneath him. He was drenched from head to foot, and the car ran with water. But his strong fingers gripped the steering-wheel like a vise, and he still imagined in his own heart that he would gain the victory.

Yet, how simple a thing will alter the destiny of a man's life!

The cross-roads to the shore were marked by two switches set close together on either corner of the turning. These switches differed from the others that marked the main road by having old tin cans hung from the top of them. Now it so happened that a week before the events narrated in this chapter a small boy, on mischief bent, had moved one of these cans and converted it into a treasure-house for various stones and bits of glass that he had gathered from the beach.

Jordison passed this switch and, coming to the next one with its tin can, turned sharply to the right, thinking it to be the first of the two guide-posts, though it was in

reality the second. The great car swung round in the water with the surge of a liner turning in the trough of an angry sea. Then the fore part of it sank and shivered and stopped suddenly, and Jordison was flung out from his seat into two feet of water.

He scrambled to his feet and rose dripping from the sea. He still thought he was on the hardway, and quickly resolved to leave the car and struggle shoreward on foot. The yellow lamp still shed its gleam over the waters, and the black car loomed behind it like a wreck marked out by the Trinity House authorities.

Jordison raised one foot to step forward, and found to his horror that he was gripped by the ankle. Then he tried the other, but something had laid hold of it by the calf. He exerted all his great strength and tore one foot from the bonds that clasped it, but the movement thrust the other farther into the sand. It was buried now almost to the knee, and the water came above his waist. The light of the car was but two yards from him. If he could only reach it there would at least be something solid beneath his feet.

He flung himself on his face and swam so as to keep his head above water. One leg was free and he was careful not to touch the sand with that foot. But the other was slowly being sucked down. A wolf with one paw in a trap was better circumstanced than William Jordison in that hour. The trap holds, but cannot draw its victim into its jaws.

Jordison took most of the weight off his body by swimming, but the quicksands seemed to have a peculiar

power of suction apart from the weight of the thing they grasped. His efforts only prolonged the agony. Inch by inch he was drawn down into the depths until the sand reached nearly to his waist. Again and again he flung himself forward and tried to reach the car, which was itself sinking down into the same doom. Once he got within six inches of it, but never afterward so near. The water surged past him in little waves.

He shrieked aloud and called upon the God who had forsaken him. His only answer was the howl of the wind and the splash of many waters. Then suddenly the light of the car sank beneath the sea and there was darkness. And in that darkness William Jordison died.

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